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Can spiritual maturity be nurtured in Northern English Anglican congregations?

An exploration of whether parishioners can grow spiritually through an experiential course on prayer using methods based in Ignatian practice

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A thesis in one volume
for the degree of Doctor of Theology and Ministry

Department of Theology and Religion

Durham University

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Can spiritual maturity be nurtured in Northern English Anglican congregations?

An exploration of whether parishioners can grow spiritually through an experiential course on prayer, using methods based in Ignatian practice

This project began with an observation that people who joined small rural Church of England churches found it hard to grow beyond the beginnings of faith and that some long-standing church-goers struggled to grow spiritually. A further concern was that the Church of England's current emphasis on strategies for church growth was diverting congregational leaders away from an appropriate level of attention to the spiritual growth of their congregations.

This thesis argues that congregational leaders should be encouraged to give more attention to the nurturing of growth towards spiritual maturity in the local congregation. It does this by asking the question, 'What is spiritual maturity?'; examining models of human maturity from secular human potential psychology, faith development theory and Ignatian spirituality, before presenting a theoretical model of spiritual maturity. This 12 point model hypothesises that a significant difference between psychological and spiritual understandings of maturity is the discrepancy between human potential psychology's suggestion of self-actualisation as the goal of human life and surrender to God as a key aspect of spiritual maturing.

The research created an extensive original dataset and analysed whether spiritual maturity can be nurtured using methods of ethnographic study and action research. The research tracks 24 participants through an experiential course on prayer, written for this research project, and a sermon series, using semi-structured interviews before and after to assess changes in the participants' spiritual lives and to enquire whether these changes match the model of spiritual maturity proposed.

The contention of the thesis is threefold: that clergy should pay more attention to the nurture of spiritual growth; that Ignatian practice can be used in the congregational setting to nurture spiritual maturity and that corporate spiritual experience has a significance for growth which is currently underestimated.

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Statement of Copyright

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There is one name on the title page – any mistakes are mine.

Chapter 1 Introduction

'Maturity is not equated with perfection. Rather maturity implies a decision to remain committed to the journey, even when one experiences failure.'¹

Loughlan Sofield

Everyone reflects occasionally upon their working life and perhaps asks themselves the question, 'Why do I do what I do?' Priests and ministers of religion may be more likely to pose themselves this question than people in secular employment. From before my ordination in the Church of England in 1998, I was interested both in my own and others' spiritual journey. Although we are all different and unique, Christians believe there is only one God and it might therefore be considered that in relating to that same God, one would find similarities and recognisable points of reference across different peoples' relationships with God. A primary aspect of my priestly vocation was the desire to encourage people to journey with God: to help other people to come closer to God and to know God for themselves. I had learned a great deal from hearing about other people's spiritual journeys and benefitted from the wisdom of those I considered to be 'further along the road' than myself. When I became a priest, I began to ask myself what it was in these wiser and more experienced people that marked them out as such. How had they developed in this way? What in fact was the nature of the 'spiritual journey' itself? There is a view that the spiritual journey is something which is undertaken alone. Gerald May has suggested that the 'spiritual growth process' is not something that can be 'packaged, programmed or taught,' yet my own experience suggested that in fact we can learn from the wise companionship of others and that we can be taught things which assist

¹ Sofield, Loughlan, 'Developing Christian Maturity in Our Pluralistic Society,' *Human Development* 26, no. 3 (2005), p.6.

our spiritual growth, *when we appropriate them for ourselves*. There is something active and dynamic about spirituality, it is not something that we merely read about or consider intellectually.

Working in a mainstream denomination, serving Anglican parishes which attempted to meet the needs of a wide cross section of the population (as opposed to the gathered or eclectic types of congregation, often more usually found in cities), I became concerned that the church in which I served seemed to be able to ‘make disciples’, for example through courses for enquirers like Alpha and Emmaus, but was failing to keep them.² Why did people struggle to grow in faith once they had joined a congregation? Why did clergy not make the encouragement of spiritual growth a greater priority? These were the observations that led me to begin this research into the question of whether spiritual maturity can be nurtured and the concomitant questions, how do we define spiritual maturity and can we trace its development? Is there in fact such a thing as spiritual maturity and would it differ in any way from psychological maturity?

Some definitions

Before we go any further, it would be helpful to define what is meant by words like spirituality, faith and religion in this work. The word ‘spirituality’ is very broadly used nowadays; there are probably as many ways of defining it as there are books written about it. In 2006, Shults and Sandage said there were well over 100

² I make clear at the outset of this work that I write as a practising Christian engaged in active ministry in the Church of England, with the standpoint of an acceptance of the reality of God both in my own life and in the lives of the people who discussed their faith with me in the context of this research project. My context is given in detail in Chapter 2.

definitions in recent scholarly literature; no doubt the number has been burgeoning since, and at the risk of adding to an already over-crowded field, clarity is needed about how the term is used in this thesis.³ As a practising Christian, my understanding of the term is much more closely allied to the practice of a specific faith than some other definitions which are in common use in the UK. My understanding of spirituality is not the same as the distinction offered by Heelas and Woodhead between 'life-as religion and subjective-life spirituality',⁴ in their influential book, *The Spiritual Revolution*. Similarly, Martin Stringer suggests that 'the term has come to fill a presumed gap where the word "religion" no longer appears totally appropriate. Spirituality has a sense of the individualistic about it, as opposed to the communal nature of "religion".' He goes on to describe spirituality as 'introspective and subjective', being 'about the individual's series of existential questions, or the individual's own engagement with the divine.'⁵ However, in this work, spirituality is defined more tightly as the characteristic ways in which a person relates to the God in whom they believe. As this work deals only with Christian belief, the word 'spirituality' could almost always be prefaced by the word 'Christian' in this thesis. Sandra Schneiders' definition of spirituality is one which I find helpful:

Spirituality is the actualization of the basic human capacity for transcendence, the experience of conscious involvement in the project of life-integration through self-transcendence towards the horizon of ultimate value one perceives.⁶

³ Shults, F. LeRon and Steven J. Sandage, *Transforming Spirituality :Integrating Theology and Psychology* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), p.14.

⁴ Heelas, Paul and Linda Woodhead, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion Is Giving Way to Spirituality, Religion and Spirituality in the Modern World*. (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2005). See the discussion on distinguishing religion and spirituality: pp.5-6.

⁵ Stringer, Martin D., *Contemporary Western Ethnography and the Definition of Religion* (London, New York: Continuum, 2008), p.102.

⁶ Schneiders, Sandra Marie, 'Approaches to the Study of Christian Spirituality,' in *The Blackwell Companion to Christian Spirituality*, ed. Arthur Holder (Malden, Mass., Oxford and Victoria: Blackwell, 2005), p.16

The notion of self-transcendence is something which, in my thinking, is a key aspect of spirituality. I agree with Stringer that the word 'religion' sometimes seems inappropriate and, in the UK in particular, attracts some negative political connotations. 'Religion' is used however a great deal in the US context, where much research into the psychology of religion takes place, and we therefore need to be clear on what is meant by it. In this thesis, 'religion' is more closely defined than 'spirituality' and refers to the practice of a specific set of beliefs, more akin to the word 'faith' which I also see as more closely allied to the content of what is believed and the external ways in which that belief is lived out. Spirituality here can be construed as more subjective than religion or faith, dealing as it does with the individual's relationship, which is necessarily personal. This does not however deny a corporate aspect to spirituality, and this will emerge through the thesis. Marie McCarthy's view is that 'authentic spirituality' will be 'marked by a dynamic relationship between contemplation and action' and will also issue in community: 'We do not undertake the spiritual quest alone. We need communities which nurture and hold us, communities which keep the traditions and charisms alive and which hand them on to the next generation.'⁷ I concur with this view of spirituality from Wendy Tyndale, writing in the field of global development:

Spirituality is not the same as the religious framework within which people usually (though not necessarily) become aware of it, but without it that framework will become ossified as merely a tradition handed down by our ancestors with no living relation to our lives today.⁸

⁷ McCarthy, Marie, 'Spirituality in a Postmodern Era,' in *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, ed. James Woodward and Stephen Pattison (Malden, MA; Oxford; Carlton, Victoria: Blackwell, 2000), p.200.

⁸ Tyndale, Wendy R., *Visions of Development: Faith-Based Initiatives* (Aldershot and Burlington: Ashgate, 2006), p.155.

I am concerned that the ossification of which she speaks has already occurred in some Anglican churches and is in danger of spreading. She continues: 'it is not the ordering of society that is the centre of the spiritual search but rather to develop an awareness of our unity with God and with each other and all beings.'⁹ Tyndale speaks of the spiritual search as something which unifies us with others, and indeed all creation, not something which is purely subjective as Heelas and Woodhead would have it. Esther Reed, writing on Christian ethics, also warns us about allowing ourselves to 'slip into extreme forms of individualism in which spirituality is privatised, its criteria are pragmatic, and discourse about God reveals only what is hidden and internal to the heart,' and permitting the dilution of Christianity into 'a form of therapy that induces some vague feeling of well-being'. She goes on to assert that, 'The individual must ... work to create spiritual meaning and truth.'¹⁰ This work to create spiritual meaning is both an individual and a communal pursuit.

Some practicalities

This questioning and speculation about the role of spirituality in the lives of the congregations I served led me to ask why people did not seem to be able to get past 'the beginning' of faith. My hypothesis was that church leaders were so busy attempting to lead their churches into numerical growth that they failed to grow their congregations spiritually, paying insufficient attention to those already in the congregation who needed to be guided beyond the basic teachings and practice of the Christian faith. I conjectured that as the church was in numerical decline, it was becoming increasingly important to foster spiritual growth, to nurture the faith of the

⁹ Tyndale, *Visions of Development*, p.155

¹⁰ Reed, Esther D., *The Genesis of Ethics: On the Authority of God as the Origin of Christian Ethics* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000), p.xiv.

people amongst whom clergy minister, attempting to take them beyond the beginnings of faith into a place where they could recognise the presence of God for themselves and discern the invitation to go deeper.

A cursory look at some recent literature confirms that my concern was relevant.¹¹

When I thought more deeply about these factors in my own ministerial context, my question became how could 'jobbing vicars' in small Anglican congregations in largely rural places encourage spiritual growth? From that a second question emerged. If there was spiritual development, presumably it was towards something which might be termed spiritual maturity? Writers of both popular and academic theology seemed to take for granted the existence of spiritual maturity, but rarely attempted to describe what form it might take. My own spiritual experience, and the experience of guiding others in their spiritual formation, led me to believe that spiritual development was a reality, and that there might be such a thing as spiritual maturity. If it existed, what did it look like; could it be fostered in the context of small rural Anglican parish congregations?

Thus an initial hypothesis evolved: that churchgoers could be encouraged to grow spiritually towards something we might term 'spiritual maturity' by the actions and input of clergy.¹² This input could be offered in the setting of the church congregation, in small groups and in preaching, rather than in the one-to-one interaction of spiritual direction. These actions would take the form of invitations to parishioners to explore contexts which might open them to direct experience of God.

¹¹ See for example Barley, Lynda, *Churchgoing Today* (London: Church House Publishing, 2006), Chapter 1 in particular. Also Fanstone, Michael J., *The Sheep That Got Away* (Tunbridge Wells: Monarch, 1993); Richter, Philip J. and Leslie J. Francis, *Gone but Not Forgotten: Church Leaving and Returning* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1998).

¹² This is not to imply that people *only* grow spiritually through the actions of clergy; simply that clergy are well-placed to undertake such intentional development.

The action chosen, of the many possible, was encouragement to prayer through an experiential course and a sermon series and the methodology and results are dealt with in detail in chapters 3 and 4. My aim was to develop a highly nuanced understanding of Christian spiritual maturity which might then resource others involved in ministerial practice and to explore the question of whether or not the nurture of spiritual development in congregational settings is a valuable use of ministerial time and energy. Suggestions for ministerial practice drawn from this research project are offered in the closing chapter. This in no ways denigrates the practice of individual spiritual direction but should be seen as complementary. It was my observation that most of the people in the congregations I knew were not at that point in their spiritual life where they would request individual guidance in their life of prayer and their relationship with God. The possibility of such a thing would be unknown to many, or seen as the province of the 'professionally religious', that is, those in community life, the ordained and those in authorised lay ministries.

Spiritual maturity and psychological maturity

In order to explore the questions already framed, it will be necessary to set up a model of spiritual maturity and this is detailed in Chapter 3. What also needs clarification is that although spiritual maturity might be posited, it is emphatically not a goal to be achieved, or a place where one might 'rest on one's laurels'. To use a scientific analogy, it might be likened to absolute zero, a theoretical lowest possible temperature which in actuality is never reached, although it is the notional lowest point on the Kelvin scale. Similarly, spiritual maturity might be thought of as the point at which the human being, the human will, becomes entirely aligned with the

will of God; something to be aimed for perhaps, but accepted as beyond the reach of human agency in our current context.

We might assume that spiritual maturity and psychological maturity would be closely aligned and the relationship between them is closely explored in this thesis. A model of psychological maturity from the human potential field of psychology, with its emphasis upon self-actualisation as the ultimate goal of human development, is brought into dialogue with the spiritual model to examine points of agreement and contrast. My hypothesis was that certain behaviours could be construed as being 'spiritually mature'. This hypothesis was drawn both from my own spiritual experience and from my observations of and interactions with other practising Christians as part of my ministry. Of the behaviours that seemed to denote spiritual maturity, one seemed very significant: the decision to submit to, trust in, rely on or be obedient to God. I had both experienced and observed that, given opportunities to be open to God in prayer, change in the spiritual life would occur, and that the trajectory of this change was towards greater reliance upon or obedience to God. This did not take the form of dependency, nor an inability to think and act for oneself, or an unquestioning acceptance of life events as being 'fated'. Rather it was an understanding of the limitations of human agency, in a way that leads people not into fear, or loss of self-esteem, but rather into freedom to act humanely; to make the choice to submit one's own will to the will of the God who is deemed worthy of worship and service. I decided that a suitable umbrella term for these ideas was 'surrender,' as a descriptor of what seemed to me to be a key aspect of the process of spiritual development. This word may be considered to be too gendered, or freighted with difficult associations for many people, but it has been chosen carefully to reflect something which seems to me to be a gradual and gentle process. In this context, to

surrender is to yield, to choose to give up oneself in some way, perhaps with the subtext of ‘for the greater good’. This hypothesis about the value of surrender as an aspect of spiritual formation was something I derived from experience and then brought to this research to be tested.¹³

The research was prompted by parochial experience and observation that the spiritual encouragement of the laity, particularly in their prayer life, resulted in a broadening and deepening of faith commitment in many cases. Further experience with a dependent congregation led me to explore this in greater depth, as part of the Church of England's focus on the fostering of lay ministry.¹⁴ In wishing to encourage maturity and the movement of congregations away from an unhealthy dependence on the priest or minister, I discovered that understandings of spiritual maturity tend to be taken for granted rather than defined. Contemporary secular psychology offered a yardstick against which to test our assumptions and theories and gave rise to two observations. First, that the dialogue between theology and psychology is not very well developed, particularly in the UK, where there is a history of mistrust between the disciplines and that even in the US where there is a large body of research into the psychology of religion, the conversation between that separate discipline and theology is not very effective. Much of the current writing on spiritual maturity emanating from the US is devotional literature either from specific wings of the church, or with no direct connection with specifically Christian understandings of spirituality. Second, there seems to be a discrepancy between what secular psychology and Christian theology would consider to be maturity and an exploration

¹³ Other factors which might be significant features of spiritual maturity are considered in detail in the Chapter 3, which sets out models of maturity both spiritual and psychological.

¹⁴ This term indicates a congregation which struggles with or is incapable of independent decision making and needs constant guidance and leadership.

of a sharply-defined tension between self-actualisation and surrender could be mutually illuminating. There may also be a way in which these seemingly divergent ideas can ultimately be integrated. Would participants in the research show signs of surrender as an authentic and meaningful way of relating to the God in whom they believed? Would encouragement to deepen their prayer life result in a movement towards greater trust in a transcendent Other? Would there be any discernible development at all?

Can spiritual growth be measured and evaluated?

There is little written on this in British theology at the moment, but in the burgeoning field of psychology of religion in the US, there are many studies, usually quantitative, which aim to measure the impact and effects of religious belief. A handful of these look at the idea of measuring spiritual growth and two of these questionnaire tools were combined and used at the beginning and end of the active research phase. They were very much used only as a supportive element, as the research was qualitative, in that a small sample, 24 participants, were interviewed at great depth about their spiritual lives. Their experience of a course designed to provoke and foster spiritual change and development was evaluated during the second interview phase. The research methodology is described in detail in Chapter 2. The research parameters were constrained by my ongoing work as a parish priest and the need to find a methodology workable in that context. I considered that qualitative methods like the semi-structured interview and small group work were much more appropriate and far more likely to uncover the depth of a person's relationship with God by giving close attention to what each individual person had to say.

It was my hope that in doing this work there could be a two-fold outcome. The first motivation was to learn how people develop spiritually in order to share that wisdom with the wider church community. The second objective, to help the individual participants in the study themselves to grow as part of the work, increased in importance as the research progressed. The project was not merely to observe, but was also intended to stimulate growth and assess change in response to the stimulation offered. It was therefore a fully realized pastoral cycle, including both action and theological reflection on that action, resulting in suggestions for new praxis. This action-research aspect of the study increased in importance during the research experience and made the project more complex than a purely observational ethnographic study. This is dealt with in detail in the section on auto-ethnography in Chapter 2 on methodology.¹⁵

The research context - can spiritual maturity be fostered in the parish church setting?

As someone who has received individual spiritual direction for many years, personal experience has taught me that it is an effective way of developing the interior life of reflection and prayer and also that the movement, however halting and uncertain at times, is most usually in the direction of what I have described as greater maturity. However, the vast majority of Christians in the parish church context do not receive individual spiritual direction. In what ways might I as a parish priest encourage others to ‘mature’ in their faith, and what strategies could I use which would give scope for this to happen? I had long observed in myself that the times of movement

¹⁵ A useful recent contribution to the literature on action research with specific reference to practical theology is Cameron, Helen et al., *Talking About God in Practice* (London: SCM, 2010).

towards God and the deepening of faith were those times when I was able to pray more, often following a period of difficulty or ‘dryness’ in prayer. Growth also came through the opportunity to reflect on my prayer with a skilled listener, my spiritual director. She was able to see patterns which I failed to recognize, being too close to my own experience to be able to see them. Through attentive listening, she was able to disentangle my inchoate thoughts and reveal another depth of learning. For the last ten years, I have received spiritual direction in the Ignatian tradition, although not a Roman Catholic myself. My last three directors have been drawn from different denominations: Roman Catholic, Church of England and Methodist, but all have followed the teachings of Ignatius Loyola, the founder of the Society of Jesus and author of *The Spiritual Exercises*, a handbook for spiritual direction written in the sixteenth century and still very much in use today.¹⁶

Spiritual direction is a growth area in today’s church. Would it be a worthwhile use of my time as a church leader to find a way of using the knowledge and wisdom gained through my own Ignatian spiritual direction in my parish setting, in ways which might nurture spiritual maturity in the members of the congregation? The undertaking of a research project in this area might also allow any findings to be more widely disseminated. The more I reflected on the task of the priest in today’s rural parish churches and juxtaposed this with the Church of England’s emphasis on collaborative leadership and lay ministry, the more I considered the possibility that to focus on nurturing spiritual growth would involve a shift of missiological emphasis. The priest would be less concerned with ‘leading from the front’, or reaching out to those beyond the church, though undoubtedly those aspects of the ordained life

¹⁶ The work and influence of Ignatius is considered in detail in Chapter 3.

would remain, and for some would still be pre-eminent. Rather there would be a greater emphasis on the *missio Dei*, the notion that God is at work in the whole of the world, both within and beyond the church and the task of the congregation-based priest might be better focused on validating, affirming and giving space to people's lived experience of God, thereby enabling them to articulate their own beliefs more effectively in their own contexts.

It was my hope as an action researcher that there would be evidence of beneficial change in the participants in the study. The work I have done shows a greater degree of change in people than I expected. I think there is strong evidence of a process happening, and when I stood back and looked at the data the most accurate descriptors were words which indicated development, growth and change. As always in practical research, there were more unexpected outcomes and these are unfolded in the chapters which follow.

Chapter 2 – Methodology

'Qualitative research realizes its potential when researchers immerse themselves in a setting and struggle to figure out the best way to understand it.'¹⁷

Shelley J. Correll

This research uses the methodologies of anthropology and practical theology to undertake a piece of action research and to present an ethnography, a study of a particular cultural context. The knowledge sought is both phenomenological, in that I look at spiritual experiences gained through prayer and the effects of those experiences upon participants, and also theory-building, in that I extrapolate a process of change in the spiritual life through focussed prayer from the analysed data. This chapter contains a description of the methods used to undertake the research, and an explanation of why they were chosen.

Research rationale

My hypothesis from observation

I have outlined my concern about the apparent lack of attention to spiritual development of congregations within the Church of England in the introduction. Why was it so difficult for people to progress beyond the beginnings of faith? To use a horticultural analogy with a solid biblical precedent, were clergy simply planting seed in very shallow soil, and then looking for more shallow soil to plant, failing to nurture and enrich that which was already growing? To extend the metaphor, should ordained leaders place more emphasis on tending the existing

¹⁷ Correll, Shelley J, 'Reflections of a Novice Researcher,' in *Qualitative Research in Practice: Examples for Discussion and Analysis*, ed. Sharan B. Merriam (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2002), p.261.

garden; planting in deeper and richer soil and keeping watering? I decided to look at what secular humanistic psychology had to say about the mature human person and alongside that to posit a model of how spiritual maturity might share many of these characteristics but might also include a type of radical trust in God, which I have termed surrender above. I am aware that such language might need to be redeemed in order to be used in a constructive way, especially in the eyes of feminist theology, which might justifiably object to the use of the word ‘surrender’, if it is allowed to be indelibly associated with the patriarchal oppression of women in society and in the church. What I want to put forward, however, is an understanding of surrender as a way in which all humanity, women and men alike, yield possession of their lives to God, putting God at the centre of their existence, rather than their own will. This alignment of the human will with God’s will is not something that is a childlike dependence, nor is it an aspect of human power relationships, but something that might be encountered *beyond* the achievement of self-actualisation as suggested by human potential psychology.¹⁸ An exploration of these differing models is offered in the next chapter.

Drawing on Ignatian practice

I drew on my own experience of receiving spiritual direction for my ministry and the wisdom learned there. The great figures of the historical Christian spiritual tradition had written about their experiences of God, in order that others might share in that wisdom. These spiritual experiences and their formulations in texts are enduringly powerful sources for transformation today. Because the scope of this research project inevitably limits the dialogue partners, it seemed sensible to work with a

¹⁸ Cf. Augustine, Saint, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), Book VIII, pp. 133-154.

spiritual tradition of which I already had some knowledge and experience; Ignatius Loyola was the clear choice for these reasons:

- Although not a Catholic myself, I had received direction in the Ignatian tradition from a Jesuit for the past 11 years.
- Ignatian spirituality saw an immense resurgence in the second half of the twentieth century and currently has a very broad interdenominational appeal, being used across denominational boundaries.
- Ignatius' emphasis on spiritual companionship, albeit one to one, and his insistence that the Exercises should be tailored to the exercitant, using the wisdom and discernment of the spiritual guide, made me ask whether Ignatian practices could be extended into work with Anglican congregations.

Ignatian spirituality therefore became a key underpinning of my field research, with the action phase being a course and sermon series on prayer which included significant contributions from Ignatian practice.

‘Making a difference’ in the congregation – why choose prayer?

It is natural, as a parish priest, to want to ‘make a difference’ to the faith of your congregation. Margaret Crain and Jack Seymour in their article on the ethnographer as minister point out that it is entirely understandable that congregational leaders/ministers/clergy would be concerned about the effects of their research on their congregations.¹⁹ ‘Ethnographers must acknowledge their own values and their responsibilities to those with whom they work because ethnography inevitably

¹⁹ Crain, Margaret Ann and Jack Seymour, 'The Ethnographer as Minister: Ethnographic Research in Ministry,' *Religious Education* 91, no. 3 (1996), p.300.

intervenes in the lives of people. Likewise it changes the researcher.²⁰ Their key thesis is that ethnography as ministry is about education and empowerment. They suggest that can happen through listening and honouring stories; by providing an open and hospitable environment; by describing what is heard so people can react to it; hearing which leads to 'claiming convictions'; empowering people with analytical and theological tools 'to engage their stories and experiences' and providing places for people to reflect together on God's presence in their lives.²¹ My own research would seem to reinforce and extend their findings, and we will return to a discussion of the empowering aspects of ministerial teaching on spirituality in the closing chapter.

In posing the questions detailed above, a further challenge emerged. How could I research these questions so that spiritual development could be both provoked and assessed? There would need to be a focus for the research; simply to talk about spirituality would be too vague. Drawing on personal experience, I considered that the greatest transformation in my own spiritual life had come through prayer. I had spent a lot of time thinking about the dynamics of prayer and thought, like Terry Veling speaking of Martin Buber, that when we pray, something in us yields or surrenders to God.

Prayer does not remove us from life, rather, when we pray, we 'yield' or refer our life to God. We listen. We seek to align ourselves with God's will, with God's heart, with God's good intentions for the world. And then, in the experience of prayer, a surprising transformation occurs, and we find that God is referring to us.²²

²⁰ Crain and Seymour, *The Ethnographer as Minister*, p.314. I look further at the issues raised here in the section on auto-ethnography.

²¹ Crain and Seymour, *The Ethnographer as Minister*, p.312.

²² Veling, Terry A., *Practical Theology: 'on Earth as It Is in Heaven'* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2005), p.9-10.

As a curate, I had written and led a ten week course on prayer which had proved remarkably transformative for the participants. Remembering this fruitful time, I wondered whether it would be possible to replicate it with another group of people, or had it been simply a fortuitous combination of people and circumstance in my training parish which had produced such noticeable results? The course, which I had entitled ‘Exploring Prayer’, had never been published so I was free to re-use it.²³ As the research progressed, it became clear that there were several people in the congregations who could not, or did not wish, to attend one of the prayer groups. It was decided to offer a sermon series at the same time, so that these people could take part. The revised Exploring Prayer course, together with the sermon series, formed the heart of the practical research.

Contributing to future ministerial practice

Practical theology is always ultimately about asking the question ‘So what do we do differently now?’ How do those observations in ministerial life which lead to exploration of a question, and perhaps to a change in praxis, ‘cash out’ in the life of the wider church? It is the practical theologian’s hope that their research will lead to something of wider validity, something of value to groups of people beyond their immediate context. Equally, it is vitally important that the research is contextualised; only then can others decide how much might be transferable or relevant in their own contexts.

²³ As the research progressed it was became clear that five of the ten sessions needed re-writing and changing to reflect the increased focus on Ignatian practice. This is detailed more fully in Chapter 4.

Practical theology

The last two decades have seen the establishment of practical theology as a serious academic discipline and a distinct move away from the understanding of pastoral theology as ‘hints and tips’ for those engaged in ordained ministry. Works like *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology* offer an overview of recent changes and the current status of practical theology.²⁴ Practical theology is concerned with praxis; the outworking of theology in concrete situations, with real people. Alastair Campbell is clear that it is not something restricted to the clergy, or even to the church: ‘Practical theology is concerned with the study of specific social structures and individual initiatives within which God’s continuing work of renewal and restitution becomes manifest. These may be found either inside or outside the church.’²⁵ Whilst acknowledging the wideness of this remit, it is of course clear that my particular research has been done within a church context and in my capacity as a parish priest.

Practical theology has also concerned itself with method and a cyclical model of ‘experience – exploration – reflection – action’ has been widely accepted.²⁶ The pastoral cycle, as it is often termed, is a pattern which indicates that practical theologians believe that theory arises from experience, and that through a process of

²⁴ Woodward, James and Stephen Pattison, eds., *The Blackwell Reader in Practical and Pastoral Theology* (Malden, MA; Oxford; Carlton, Victoria: Blackwell, 2000).

More recent contributions include: Graham, Elaine L., Heather Walton, and Frances Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods* (London: SCM Press, 2005); Graham, Elaine L., Heather Walton, and Frances Ward, *Theological Reflection : Sources* (London: SCM Press, 2007); Osmer, Richard R., *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, Michigan and Cambridge UK: Eerdmans, 2008); Veling, *Practical Theology: 'on Earth as It Is in Heaven'*.

²⁵ Campbell, Alastair, 'The Nature of Practical Theology,' in *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, ed. James Woodward and Stephen Pattison (Malden, MA; Oxford; Carlton, Victoria: Blackwell, 2000).

²⁶ These terms are used in particular in Ballard, Paul and John Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action* (London: SPCK, 1996), pp.77-78.

reflecting on lived experience in a structured way, new thinking and therefore renewed and better praxis can emerge. I deal with this in more detail below, following preliminary remarks on methodology. Ballard and Pritchard suggest that practical theology 'comes out of shared experience, is done from below, is a dialogue, draws on the tradition and is a single activity.'²⁷ The holistic nature of the enterprise is underlined: 'The pastoral cycle is a unifying force because it compels us to work out of the concrete reality in which God has placed us.'²⁸ Parish priests are well placed to undertake this holistic type of practical theology, rooted as they are in the 'concrete reality' of everyday parish life and hopefully aware of the interconnectedness of the life of the congregation and the messiness of the living-out of faith in the world.²⁹

A key aspect of the overarching methodology is that of mutual critical correlation, helpfully described by Swinton and Mowat: 'Mutual critical correlation sees the practical-theological task as bringing situations into dialectical conversations with insights from the Christian tradition and perspectives drawn from other sources of knowledge (primarily the social sciences).'³⁰ Throughout the project, care has been taken to bring everyday parish life, particularly as expressed in the regular prayer of parishioners, into dialogue with the Christian spiritual tradition, particularly as expressed by Ignatius Loyola in his *Spiritual Exercises* and with the insights into psychological maturity offered by humanistic psychology. Methods and techniques of qualitative research from anthropology have allowed engagement with the lived

²⁷ Ballard and Pritchard, *Practical Theology In Action*, pp.79-86.

²⁸ Ballard and Pritchard, *Practical Theology In Action*, p.86.

²⁹ I accept that it is also possible for parish clergy to live their lives entirely in a church-centric 'ghetto', failing to engage with the wider community, but I would not wish to commend this as effective ministerial practice.

³⁰ Swinton, John and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM Press, 2006), p.77.

experience of individual churchgoers, both as individuals and within groups, in an attempt both to define and map spiritual growth towards maturity in faith.

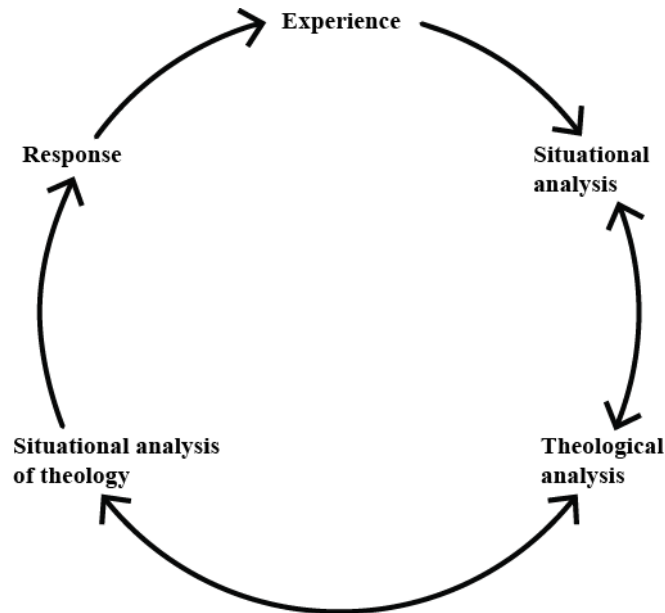
Throughout the research period, this dialectical method has been the under-girding structure: expressed in ongoing questions like ‘How does Ignatius view maturity?’, ‘Have Ignatian understandings of the spiritual life helped people in my northern, rural, Anglican congregations to grow in faith?’ and ‘How does my understanding of spiritual surrender relate to psychological maturity?’ This method of critical correlation needs to be related to the processes of practical theology, and it is to that process that we now turn.

The pastoral cycle

Alongside mutual critical correlation, the pastoral cycle is the other undergirding method of this research. The question ‘Can spiritual maturity be nurtured?’ was asked in response to the experience of parish ministry in rural Anglican congregations. The exploration took the shape of action research, detailed in Chapter 4 and the reflection has been conducted through rich description and close analysis of the findings, given in Chapter 5. This culminates in suggestions for future ministerial practice in Chapter 6 and contributes to the Church of England’s ongoing reflection upon its own work. There are other ways of picturing the pastoral cycle, and I want briefly to allude to others which can broaden our thinking.

Emmanuel Lartey suggests a flow of ideas between theology and situational analysis: a five stage theory of ‘experience - situational analysis – theological analysis –

situational analysis of theology – response’.³¹ This is useful because it highlights the complexity of the process of the reflection stage.



Lartey's pastoral cycle

Figure 1

Andrew Todd uses the notion of 'reflection' in its scientific sense: 'the use of distanced images in order to see a situation afresh,' to model a dialogue between the situation under scrutiny and the Christian tradition.³² This also is helpful because it illustrates the method of mutual critical correlation, whereby different disciplines can illuminate each other, and it indicates the complexity of our attempts to reflect theologically upon human actions. The model is however less effective in showing the flow of experience within time.

³¹ This model is well described in his essay in Willows, David and John Swinton, eds., *Spiritual Dimensions of Pastoral Care : Practical Theology in a Multidisciplinary Context* (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2000).

³² See West, Michael, Graham Noble, and Andrew Todd, *Living Theology* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1999). The diagram is on p.99 and is reproduced overleaf.

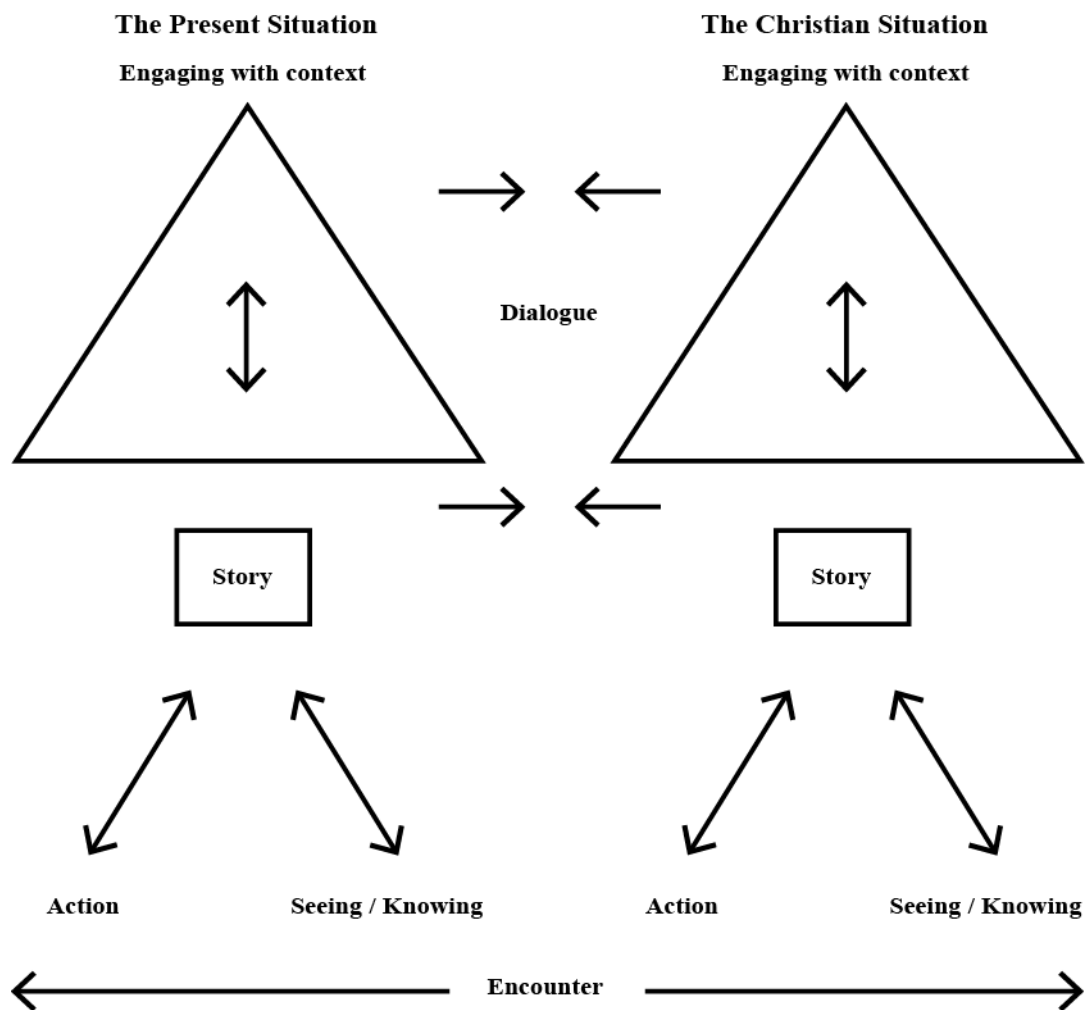


Figure 2 – Todd model of theological reflection

I myself offered a continuous flow model of separating out strands and re-weaving a new praxis, rather than a cyclical model, in my article 'Can the Pram Service help the church to grow up?'³³ The advantage of this model is that it indicates both the messy nature of pastoral experience, the linearity of our experience within time, and the potential to create new and better patterns from existing experience. A model of the cycle of theological reflection actually used in this piece of research and developed from it is shown overleaf.

³³ Westmoreland, Diane R., 'Can the Pram Service Help the Church to Grow Up?', *Contact* 153 (2007), pp.41-2, fig 3.

Design of the research project as a pastoral cycle

The methodology of this project may appear complex. A practical theological pastoral cycle can be traced through the research, with the use of several social science research methods coming together to provide a close and detailed study of the particular context, or ‘ethnography’.

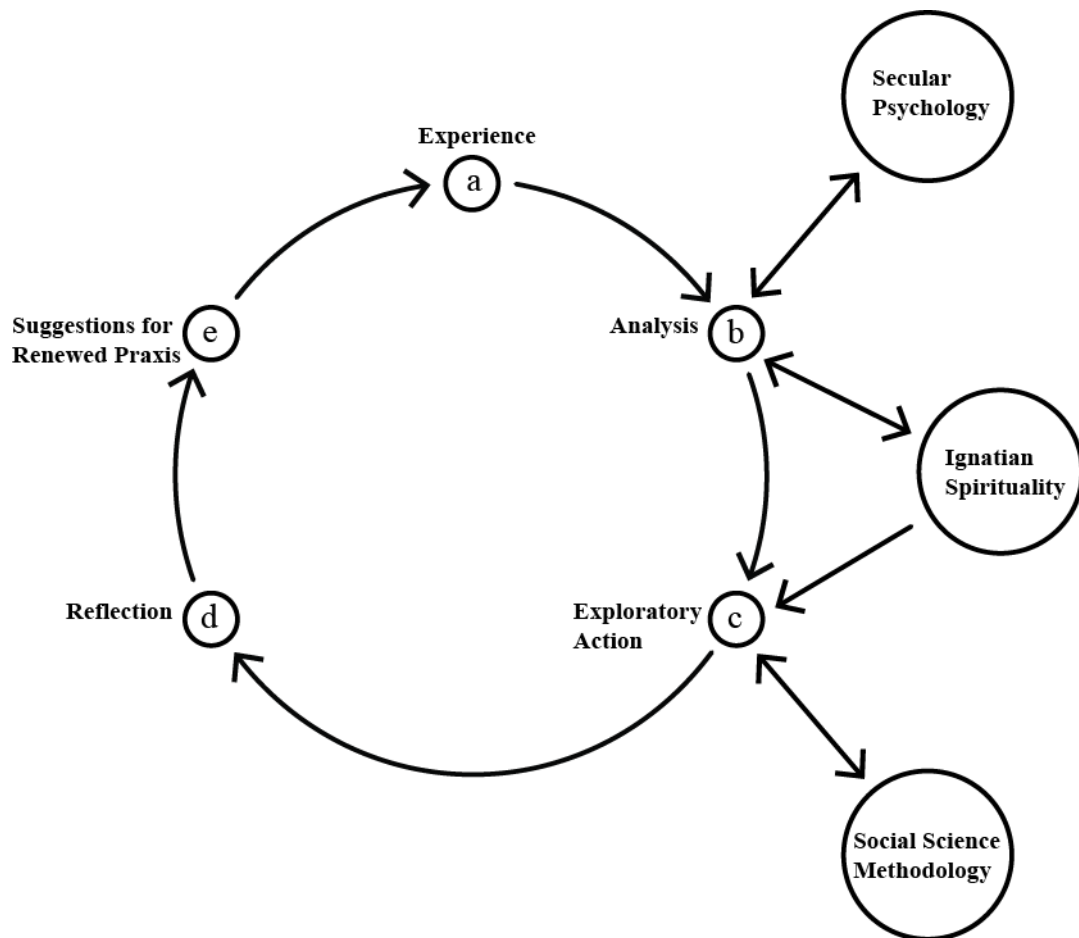


Figure 3 – The pastoral cycle employed in this research

Experience (a) was first brought into dialogue with secular psychology and Ignatian spirituality in the first stage of analysis (b), then in the action phase (c), Ignatian spirituality and social science methods become conversation partners, allowing a

further cycle of complex reflection upon experience (d), resulting in suggestions for new praxis (e).³⁴

Martin Stringer defines ethnography as 'the long-term study of a particular community by an individual researcher who aims, so far as it is possible, to be a complete participant observer.'³⁵ I was more than a participant observer, as I spent several years with the congregations as their Vicar, during which time I embarked on this research project, with their co-operation. The difficulties of researching situations of which you are already a part is acknowledged, and is considered further below. Increasingly however, anthropology accepts the validity of the work of the so-called 'embedded researcher', as long as this embeddedness is also truly reflexive³⁶. Dialogue with secular psychology, Ignatian spirituality and gender studies has continued throughout the research period, which has further complexified the project.

Experience (a)

The strands of experience which came together were my personal experience of Ignatian spirituality and its value; my observations of parish life as a congregational

³⁴ These stages, (a) to (e), are explained in further detail below.

³⁵ Stringer, Martin D., *On the Perception of Worship* (Birmingham: University of Birmingham Press, 1999), p.14.

³⁶ See the following contributions to this field: Krenske, Leigh, "'You're Researching What?' The Importance of Self in Ethnographic Research,' in *Qualitative Research in Practice: Examples for Discussion and Analysis*, ed. Sharan B. Merriam (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2002); Strathern, Marilyn, 'The Limits of Auto-Ethnography,' in *Anthropology at Home*, ed. Anthony Jackson (London and New York: Tavistock, 1987); Wolff, Richard F., 'Self-Reflection: An Essential Quality for Phenomenological Researchers,' in *Qualitative Research in Practice: Examples for Discussion and Analysis*, ed. Sharan B. Merriam (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2002). Davies, Charlotte Aull, *Reflexive Ethnography*, 2nd ed. (Abingdon, New York: Routledge, 2008).

leader and my hypothesis that surrender was a key characteristic spiritual development.

Questioning and Analysis (b)

This precipitated a two-fold reflection: why were so many people in the types of congregations I served seeming not to grow spiritually? Speaking to other clergy, this seemed a common situation. Why was the Church of England placing such an emphasis on its clergy increasing congregations numerically, at the expense, it seemed to me, of their nurturing the spiritual growth of those already attending? Conversation partners at this stage of the work were Ignatian spirituality and secular psychology.

Exploratory Action (c)

The action stage began with the formation of a hypothesis: years of experience as a committed Anglican lay person and then as a member of the clergy told me that people could grow spiritually in environments which permitted questioning and discussion and in response to various types of teaching input. I believed that I was on a spiritual journey and had experienced significant change which had already brought me to ordination; I had seen evidence of spiritual growth in some people's lives which seemed to move them to a deeper and more profoundly compassionate and loving way of life. I knew that Ignatius Loyola believed in spiritual growth and had devoted his life to that belief, in the evolving of the *Spiritual Exercises* and ultimately the founding of the Society of Jesus.

Drawing on these experiences, I conjectured that there was something distinctive about Christian spiritual maturity which could be described as surrender; a thought-

through and experienced knowledge that one's entire life is bound up in God. This surrender could be construed as kenotic, mirroring in some way the divine self-giving of the incarnation, as we are called by God to give up the fullness of who we are into God's safe-keeping. This should not be confused with the politics of human power relationships and the historical oppression of patriarchy. Nor should it involve a loss of or suppression of who we are as people, for we remember that biblical theology tells us that we are created in the image of God and that Christ came that we might have fullness of life, something which fulfils human potential rather than denying it.³⁷ Nor should surrender be confused with child-like dependence on God; rather it is a willed and self-aware decision both to take responsibility for one's own life and actions and at the same time to acknowledge that our very existence derives from the reality of God's sustaining presence. The difference between this understanding of maturity and the secular psychological model of maturity offered by humanistic psychology is explored further in Chapter 3.

The second part of the action stage was to test out this hypothesis; to explore whether change could be nurtured and measured or mapped in some way. The tools for this part of the exploration reflect the interdisciplinary nature of much recent practical theology: anthropology offered the tools of the ethnographic study, using the social science methods of questionnaires, semi-structured interviews and an action/research intervention (the prayer course and sermon series). Ignatian practice underpinned the delivery of both the prayer course and the sermon series.

³⁷ Genesis 1;27; John 10:10.

Reflection (d)

The action research phase generated a huge amount of data. Prior to comparison with the original hypothesis, computer software was used to analyse the data.³⁸

Grounded theory techniques were used in an iterative process of reflection, to allow theory to emerge from the data, before the second stage of the reflection process: allowing the data to interrogate the initial hypothesis. Was my original intuition that people could indeed grow in faith maturity through the planned actions of parish clergy confirmed? Did evidence that surrender was a feature of the developing life of the spirit emerge and was the trajectory of development in that direction? Was Ignatius' understanding of what constitutes a spiritually mature person, that is, letting God be God, finding God in all things, becoming a contemplative in action and doing all for the greater glory of God, being borne out? Other factors seeming to contribute to growth were identified and alongside this, there was evidence that the original hypothesis was in part vindicated.

Suggestions for renewed praxis (e)

The crucial question in each cycle of practical theology is 'So what do we do differently, in the light of this exploration of and reflection on current church practice?' What outcomes are there for future ministry?

These thoughts form the concluding chapter of this thesis, and may be briefly sketched here: ways of encouraging growth towards spiritual maturity, rooted in this research, are suggested; models of dependency on the priesthood, together with infantilising behaviour patterns by the clergy, are discouraged, instead people might be nurtured through spiritual sharing in groups. Parish teaching and guidance in the

³⁸ QSR International – NVivo version 7.

spiritual life could move towards a developing reliance on a theology firmly rooted in the kenotic self-giving of Christ, in whose eternal and loving self-giving a model for mature Christian life is found. Interestingly, for Swinton and Mowat, this is a defining feature of their understanding of practical theology itself: they define practical theology as 'critical, theological reflection on the practices of the church as they interact with the practices of the world with a view to ensuring faithful participation in the continuing mission of the triune God'.³⁹ Lastly, priests and lay ministers with responsibility for spiritual guidance could give increased attention to the building up of congregations in their corporate and individual spiritual life. A key aspect of their role would then become the resourcing of the laity in mission in the world, which of course includes the church, rather than taking the leadership role in mission themselves.

Ethnography and spirituality

James Clifford, in the introduction to his seminal book with George Marcus, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, which is subtitled 'Partial Truths', describes ethnography as a literary process, 'translating the reality of others' and says that 'ethnographic truths are thus inherently *partial*, committed and incomplete'.⁴⁰ This view of the ethnographic researcher as interpreter or translator is one which remains valid and useful, and matched my experience of research into the prayer lives and spiritual growth of people amongst whom I ministered. A more recent description of the requirements of ethnographic research says that ethnography:

³⁹ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, p.25.

⁴⁰ Clifford, James, George E. Marcus, and School of American Research (Santa Fe N.M.), *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), p.7.

Requires long-term, total immersion in the social group being studied. It has the merit of encouraging depth of study, a holistic approach and the ability to discover what lies beneath the surface. It has the disadvantage of being very specific, highly subjective and impossible to verify, and focussing on one particular community. Some would say that the disadvantages outweigh the advantages, but I think the converse is true if ethnography is handled carefully.

Thus says Martin Stringer in the early pages of his recent book on ethnography.⁴¹ He goes on to give a rapid history of the field which is penetrating in its insights. He favours a tightly defined view of ethnography and it might be considered that if we use his parameters, my research went beyond ethnography, as it sought not only to observe but to interact with participants with a view to provoking change. However, Charlotte Aull Davies points out that different traditions of participant observation have emerged through ethnographical research.⁴² My involvement in the parishes I worked with could be construed as an outsider becoming fully immersed in a culture, as within the Church of England, stipendiary clergy usually come in from ‘outside’ and there is always the knowledge that they are likely to move on again at some future unspecified point. Davies reminds us that Robert Park and his associates at the Chicago School in the 1920s and 30s developed a slightly different tradition in social research; they worked in urban settings and studied particular cultural subgroups. These researchers were already a part of the native culture; they shared the same language and had access to the same sources of information. They all took a positivist stance in that they ‘assumed that there were social facts to be discovered and a major concern was to reduce any distortion that might be introduced by the presence of the ethnographer’.⁴³ They were the subject of critique by the hermeneutic, feminist and postmodern perspectives, and these critiques caused a transformation in the role of the ethnographer, in that reflexive considerations

⁴¹ Stringer, *Contemporary Western Ethnography and the Definition of Religion*, p.19.

⁴² Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography*, see Chapter 4.

⁴³ Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography*, p.70.

became paramount.⁴⁴ The increasing importance of reflexivity in the ethnography of religion is well illustrated in *Personal Knowledge and Beyond*, a collection of essays edited by Spickard, Landres and McGuire⁴⁵ and I shall explore below in detail what auto-ethnography meant in my particular context.

Why qualitative methods were chosen

There has been a great deal of quantitative research into the psychology of religion; the measurement of religiosity and the development of faith, particularly in the US. More qualitative work is needed in this area, particularly in the area of prayer experience and spiritual growth, which is an aspect of spirituality much written about, but rarely researched closely in concrete situations. As David Silverman points out: 'The ethnographer attempts to answer [the] question, "What is going on here?"'.⁴⁶ This was my presenting question; 'What is going on with regard to spiritual growth in rural Anglican congregations in the north of England?' My intention in this work was both to describe what was happening in people's spiritual lives, particularly in their prayer, and to interpret whether or not my intervention brought about change. Sharan Merriam identifies what she calls key characteristics of interpretive qualitative research designs:

- Researchers strive to *understand the meaning* people have constructed about their world and their experiences ... the analysis strives for depth of understanding.

⁴⁴ Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography*, p.71.

⁴⁵ Spickard, James V., J. Shawn Landres, and Meredith B. McGuire, eds., *Personal Knowledge and Beyond: Reshaping the Ethnography of Religion* (New York and London: New York University Press, 2002).

⁴⁶ Silverman, David, *Interpreting Qualitative Data: Methods for Analyzing Talk, Text and Interaction*, 3rd ed. (London ; Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2006), p.69.

- *The researcher is the primary instrument* for data collection and data analysis.
- The researcher's own biases and subjectivities need to be identified and monitored.
- Qualitative researchers build toward theory from observations and intuitive understandings gleaned from being in the field.
- The product of a qualitative inquiry is richly descriptive - words and pictures rather than numbers are used to convey what the researcher has learned.
- Qualitative research attempts to understand and make sense of phenomena from the participant's perspective.⁴⁷

Taking these characteristics into consideration, it was clear that an interpretive qualitative study would best suit my research parameters.

James Spickard and Shawn Landres contrast quantitative and qualitative researchers as the 'the generalizers' and 'the particularizers'. Ethnography is done by 'the particularizers' who 'explore what religion means to the individuals they interview, how they make sense of it and how they use it to make sense of their world.'⁴⁸ My research was to do with seeking to understand a specific community of people and it seemed to me that quantitative methods would not permit the depth of engagement and exploration with individuals that this question so clearly needed. Surely, the most effective way to assess people's spiritual growth would be to discuss it with them? The answer to this is both yes, and no. Clearly there has to be a point at which we ask participants about their spiritual life, but there is also a place for

⁴⁷ Merriam, Sharan B., *Qualitative Research in Practice: Examples for Discussion and Analysis* (San Francisco, Calif.: Jossey-Bass, 2002), pp.4-6.

⁴⁸ Spickard, Landres, and McGuire, eds., *Personal Knowledge and Beyond : Reshaping the Ethnography of Religion*, p.2.

observing whether what they say about themselves matches what they seem to believe and do in practice. For example, I found a disconnect between people describing their spiritual journey as a personal and private matter and the undoubted influence of other people in the prayer groups. Martin Stringer has a very useful discussion of the type of information that interviewing might produce. He asks what is it that is actually being studied? Is it real people doing real things or what people *say* about what they are doing and what it means to them, or the researcher and *their* understanding of what is going on? I hope my research is able to offer a truthful reflection of both what people said about their spirituality, and what I observed about their spirituality and the conclusions I drew from that. Stringer makes the distinction between 'what a person says they should be doing, what they say they are doing, and what they are actually doing' and points out that what people actually do can only be discovered by full participant observation.⁴⁹ He continues: the 'ethnographer cannot help offering an interpretation [of what is happening], and, invariably, that interpretation will depend on the ethnographer's own perception of the events as they happen.'⁵⁰ The real meaning of what is happening, then, might emerge in the interaction between the participant and the researcher and this possibility is taken seriously in this work. A key word used by the participants in their reflections on their involvement in the study was 'realise', with its clear implication that through this interaction, something was 'made real' for them. Sharan Merriam would agree with this understanding of qualitative research:

The key to understanding qualitative research lies with the idea that meaning is socially constructed by individuals in interaction with their world. The world, or reality, is not the fixed, single, agreed upon, or measurable phenomenon that it is assumed to be in positivist, quantitative research.

⁴⁹ Stringer, *On the Perception of Worship*, p.50.

⁵⁰ Stringer, *On the Perception of Worship*, p.52.

Instead, there are multiple constructions and interpretations of reality that are in flux and that change over time. Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding what those interpretations are at a particular point in time and in a particular context.⁵¹

Thus we can see that qualitative methods undoubtedly suit this type of enquiry, as careful use of them permits exploration of the nuances between what people profess, what they do and how the researcher interprets their findings.

We turn now from the theory of methods to consider the structure of the research.

The overarching structure

A detailed description of the Action Research itself appears in Chapter 4 and the findings and analysis are offered in Chapter 5. This overview of the shape of the research is offered as an aspect of the discussion of its methodology.

The data

The data that I studied were gathered from several sources:

- Interviews with participants, both before and after the action phase
- Questionnaires
- The delivery of the prayer course and the sermon series
- Observations of group meetings during the prayer course itself
- Written responses to the prayer course and sermon series (participants were given the opportunity to give both acknowledged and anonymous feedback)
- The keeping of a research journal throughout the interactive and the analysis phase.
- A return to the research field to present interim findings and hear comments

⁵¹ Merriam, *Qualitative Research in Practice: Examples for Discussion and Analysis*, pp.3-4.

There were constraints on the research; I was researching alongside full time work as a parish priest, which limited the range of the research to my own context, as both the parish and the Diocese did not wish to release me to do a separate piece of work. This also meant time constraints, although the prayer course and sermon series were accepted as part of my work as the parish priest. I was concerned at first that there would be an insufficient number of volunteers, and augmented the numbers by approaching people directly with an invitation to be involved. I began with 28 participants of whom 24 stayed with the project all the way through and this proved to be a more than adequate number, generating over 40 hours of interview material alone.

The ethics of qualitative research

Gathering data always has an ethical dimension. Here I had access to people by virtue of my position as Vicar, which gave the advantage of an already established relationship of trust. The unequal power relationship needs to be acknowledged; being the Vicar gave me a certain status in the eyes of the congregation. My ministry was collaborative in style and focussed on enabling the laity and this was a project in which they would be *invited* to take part. There was no coercion or moral pressure. The 28 participants were almost 20% of the electoral rolls of the churches involved and this wide appeal indicates that people felt included. The motivation of some participants was to help or please me, but I hoped that, whatever the motivation, people would gain more than they gave, through spending time with God in prayer.

Participant confidentiality

I launched the project by preaching about spiritual growth in the different congregations and inviting people's involvement. Confidentiality was stressed, as I knew that people might be reluctant to talk openly if their innermost thoughts on prayer were likely to be revealed to others. It was not possible, however, to be entirely confidential about attendance at the Exploring Prayer Groups, or involvement in the sermon series, as these things could be observed by others, but it was agreed that group discussions would be kept confidential within the group, and that the identity of the interviewees would be protected by the use of pseudonyms in the writing up. Transcription was done mostly by me, with the occasional assistance of one typist who was not a churchgoer and who did not know any of the participants. It would be tempting to suggest that the project proceeded with no ethical queries, and to my belief at time of writing, no-one's confidentiality has been breached, but I did discover that in receiving 'anonymous' feedback, that I could recognise the handwriting of most of my congregation much better than I had expected. I did learn a great deal as I went along: as Karen McCarthy Brown observes: 'No researcher can manage to handle all ethical, that is to say human relational, issues perfectly. Doing field research is like learning a new language. Mistakes are unavoidable.' She tells her students that 'ethnographic research is a social art-form and therefore subject to all the complexities and confusions of human relationships in general.'⁵² There are of course, other ways of handling confidentiality. Marion Goldman's suggestion of 'anchored composites', where the responses of several people are pieced together to protect anonymity, is a possible

⁵² Brown, Karen McCarthy, 'Writing About "The Other", Revisited,' in *Personal Knowledge and Beyond: Reshaping the Ethnography of Religion*, ed. James V. Spickard, J. Shawn Landres, and Meredith B. McGuire (New York and London: New York University Press, 2002), p.133.

method in research in very high profile areas.⁵³ Sometimes, the only possible choice may be to drop confidentiality altogether with the agreement of the participants, as Mark Newitt does in his recent article on healthcare chaplaincy.⁵⁴

Trust

Trust was a very important aspect of the solid relationships already built up in the parish, which the research might have impacted. I wondered how the research might affect parish life after the end of the project, and hoped to build on what I thought would be much deepened relationships, however this question could not in the end be addressed, as I accepted a move to another Diocese shortly after the close of the active research phase. Relationships did develop, but not exactly in the way I had foreseen. Sharan Merriam again has a pertinent comment:

Overlaying both the collection of data and the dissemination of findings is the researcher-participant relationship. ... This relationship and the focus of the research determines how much the researcher reveals about the actual purpose of the study - how informed the consent can be - and how much privacy and protection from harm is afforded the participants.⁵⁵

Every care was taken in this study to give privacy to the participants wherever possible, and to inform them about the purpose of the study. It was here that I found myself 'soft-peddling' as I did not want to make too much of my intention to attempt to provoke and observe growth, as this might have done one of two things: set up an unreasonable hope of spiritual transformation in some participants or cause some participants to 'manufacture' change in order to help me in some way. Thus I

⁵³ Goldman, Marion S., 'Voicing Spiritualities: Anchored Composites as an Approach to Understanding Religious Commitment,' in *Personal Knowledge and Beyond: Reshaping the Ethnography of Religion*, ed. James V. Spickard, J. Shawn Landres, and Meredith B. McGuire (New York and London: New York University Press, 2002).

⁵⁴ Newitt, Mark, 'The Role and Skills of a Hospital Chaplain: Reflections Based on a Case Study' *Practical Theology* 3, no. 2 (2010).

⁵⁵ Merriam, Sharan B., 'Assessing and Evaluating Qualitative Research,' in *Qualitative Research in Practice: Examples for Discussion and Analysis*, ed. Sharan B. Merriam (San Francisco: Jossey Bass, 2002), p.29.

couched the description of the purpose of the research in broader terms of interest in how people pray and whether focussing on prayer made any changes to people's spiritual lives. I think this was acceptable, in view of the cautions mentioned above. I was aware that prayer often exposes one to powerful emotions and knew that I could draw on my Acorn listening training and my own experience of spiritual direction to offer the safest possible space for people to explore prayer.

'First do no harm'

Merriam's comment on 'protection from harm' within the researcher-participant relationship reminds us of the requirement to consider the already-established relationships of trust in the parish and to see that perhaps people would reveal more of themselves than they might to someone new. Steps should be taken in any piece of action research to ensure that participants are not harmed, exploited or abused as a result of their involvement, and reflexive self-review should be regularly practised by the researcher. On listening back to the interviews, I was struck by the level of trust people placed in me, and humbled by it. Crain and Seymour assert that 'Ethnographers must acknowledge their own values and their responsibilities to those with whom they work because ethnography inevitably intervenes in the lives of people.'⁵⁶ Similarly, Lynn Davidman says, 'the telling of lives always changes those lives', therefore it behoves us to act ethically and with pastoral care when we undertake research in practical theology.⁵⁷ Magolda and Weems suggest that no matter how careful we are, we are never able to foresee all the possible ramifications

⁵⁶ Crain and Seymour, 'The Ethnographer as Minister: Ethnographic Research in Ministry', p.314.

⁵⁷ Davidman, Lynn, 'Truth, Subjectivity and Ethnographic Research,' in *Personal Knowledge and Beyond: Reshaping the Ethnography of Religion*, ed. James V. Spickard, J. Shawn Landres, and Meredith B. McGuire (New York and London: New York University Press, 2002), p.26.

of our actions, and point out that despite the promise of anonymity, it is often possible for ‘insiders’ to recognise other ‘insiders’,⁵⁸ as I have already pointed out. They also suggest that the very decisions made about potential harm are part of the unequal power relationship between researcher and researched, as it is nearly always the researcher who makes these decisions.⁵⁹ Although I decided that minimal damage might result from the type of research I was undertaking, it is a salutary experience to listen back to an interview and realise that you failed to listen as well as you might, or that you have not offered pastoral care when someone needed it.

Methods used during the research

Semi-structured interviews

Data was gathered in face to face interviews with the participants, one at the start of their involvement in the prayer groups or the sermon series, and one shortly afterwards. The same semi-structured questions were used at each interview, with an additional question at the second interview about their response to the prayer group or sermon series.⁶⁰ The semi-structured method allows people to speak freely and range widely over their spiritual experience and I considered that this would elicit the most interesting insights. Most of the planned questions were included in some form or another during the interviews and this generated interviews varying from 25 minutes to 135 minutes. With participants interviewed twice, this produced over 40 hours of people speaking about their spiritual lives, with specific reference to how

⁵⁸ Magolda, Peter and Lisa Weems, 'Doing Harm: An Unintended Consequence of Qualitative Inquiry?,' *Journal of College Student Development* 43, no. 4 (2002), pp.496-499.

⁵⁹ Magolda, 'Doing Harm: An Unintended Consequence of Qualitative Inquiry?', p.503.

⁶⁰ The questions are shown in Appendix One, although they were never asked in the same way twice, as people sometimes covered ground I was interested in without needing one of the trigger questions.

they prayed: a significant body of data in an area where there is not a great deal of empirical research in the UK.

The Action Research

In the attempt to establish whether spiritual growth towards maturity can be encouraged in the Anglican parish setting, rather than just enquire about the spiritual life, I decided to offer something which might nurture spiritual growth and then assess observable change. Action research is not a central strategy of ethnography, which is usually observational, but Uwe Flick points out that ‘qualitative research should be understood as art *and* method. Progress should rather be expected from the combination of methodological developments and their successful and reflected application in as many fields and research questions as possible.’⁶¹ Swinton and Mowat echo this view, that a multi-method approach ‘may be the most appropriate way forward for the practical theologian,’ hence my blending together of the methods of ethnographic enquiry with the proactive strategies of action research.⁶² Prayer seemed an obvious ‘peg’ upon which to hang a discussion of the spiritual life, hopefully getting to the heart of people’s relationship with God. As Francis and Astley have said: ‘Whatever else prayer does or does not do at the transcendent level, we believe that we should take seriously the effects that it has in the hearts, minds and lives of religious believers.’⁶³ I began with the idea of the prayer course but quickly realised when promoting this in the parish that there would be some who would not warm to talking about prayer in a group, and there were some people

⁶¹ Flick, Uwe, *An Introduction to Qualitative Research* (London: SAGE, 1998), p.266.

⁶² Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, p.50.

⁶³ Francis, Leslie J. and Jeff Astley, eds., *Psychological Perspectives on Prayer* (Leominster: Gracewing, 2001), p.xiv.

whose involvement I would have welcomed, but whose jobs made it difficult for them to commit to a regular group meeting. I therefore offered a second mode of involvement, through a sermon series on prayer which enabled more people to participate. Responding flexibly to the actual research context meant that I gained a richer body of data and could draw some comparisons between the two groups of participants.

The action research phase, consisting of the prayer course and the sermon series, took place from September 2007 to February 2008. The course, 'Exploring Prayer', consisted of ten sessions, delivered fortnightly, to give a longer period in which people could digest, pray with and reflect on the session input. Including the interview period, the prayer groups were working together for six months. The sermons group covered a shorter period of time and did not meet as a group until the feedback session in June 2010. Four sermons were preached at fortnightly intervals with interviews before and afterwards, meaning their involvement in the process was three months. With hindsight, it would have been possible to bring this group together at some point earlier in the process and something of interest might have emerged from that, but the interviews and subsequent transcription were so time-consuming that further meetings were not possible at that time. As Lyn Richards notes, making qualitative data is 'ridiculously easy.' The challenge is 'making useful, valuable data, relevant to the question being asked'.⁶⁴ What emerged as more useful than anticipated was the provision of feedback forms. Two sets were issued: one prior to the second interview, intended to help participants focus their thoughts before our second meeting and the second distributed at the final interview. The

⁶⁴ Richards, Lyn, *Handling Qualitative Data: A Practical Guide* (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi: Sage, 2005), p.33.

latter was anonymous and these provided a rich source of reflections upon the process they had shared in, with the freedom of anonymity, and the benefit of a longer time for reflection. These different strategies and sources of data meant that the process itself was many-layered, needing careful and painstaking analysis.

The analysis

At the close of the active research phase, a lengthy period of analysis began which was extended because of my move to another Diocese shortly after the end of the active phase. I had to spread the transcription and analysis over a two year period, alongside settling into a new job and geographical region. Although the delay seemed frustrating at the time and was a disadvantage, there were unexpected benefits: briefly, the opportunity to gain distance and greater objectivity on my research, and the more unexpected benefit of going back into the ‘research field’ as a real outsider, reflecting together with them on the process we had shared. This could not have been so fruitful had I remained in the same post.

Because of the amount of data generated and the challenges of managing it, I used the computer program *NVivo* to assist in examining and coding the data as different themes emerged.⁶⁵ I also chose a grounded theory approach to help focus on the data themselves before moving to a comparison with my original hypothesis. In grounded theory, data analysis and theory development proceed coterminously, the data being continually referred to as findings are drawn from them and tentative theories put forward. Grounded theory was first propounded in 1967 by the sociologists Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, who thought that previous methods of social research over-emphasised the verification of theory. They wanted to shift the focus to the

⁶⁵ Produced by QSR International – I used version 7.

data and derive theory and illustrate it by 'characteristic examples' from the dataset.⁶⁶ Chapter 5 of this thesis uses many characteristic examples from my dataset to illustrate derived theory. Lyn Richards points out that 'in grounded theory writing, the distinction is made ... between "formal theories" which are more general, and "substantive theories", ones that are particular to the substance of their data.' This type of substantive theory would be most usual in a qualitative study and is what I am hoping to offer through the analysis of my findings. Substantive theory, Richards continues, is 'local to your data, but that does not mean it's no use to anyone else.'⁶⁷ As researchers explore their data using grounded theory, however, we should note the caution expressed by David Silverman; 'Grounded theory has been criticized for its failure to acknowledge implicit theories which guide work at an early stage. It is also clearer about the generation of theories than about their test. Used unintelligently, it can degenerate into an empty building of categories.'⁶⁸ Rather than building empty categories, I build a substantive theory from the richly detailed data I have gathered, and offer detailed findings in Chapter 5.

Triangulation

One of the difficulties with the assessment of qualitative research is the establishment of reliability and validity. Triangulation, a term originating in geography which means to locate something by taking readings from different vantage points, here means the employment of several different methods, approaching the data from several angles to establish corroboration. Some years ago, Denzin and Lincoln offered this view on the multi method approach in qualitative

⁶⁶ Glaser, Barney G. and Anselm L. Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Aldine, 1999), reprint of their 1967 volume. See pp.4-6 for their description of grounded theory.

⁶⁷ Richards, *Handling Qualitative Data: A Practical Guide*, p.129.

⁶⁸ Silverman, *Interpreting Qualitative Data: Methods for Analyzing Talk, Text and Interaction*, p.96.

research: 'the use of multiple methods, or triangulation, reflects an attempt to secure an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon in question. Objective reality can never be captured. We know a thing only through its representations.'⁶⁹ Assessing these representations from different angles will enable us get a more three-dimensional picture of what is going on, and help to see correspondences. Criteria for discerning validity and reliability of research results in qualitative research have been much under discussion in recent years; Sharan Merriam offers strategies for coping with these challenges. She suggests that we consider internal validity - how congruent are one's findings with reality? She also suggests the process of triangulation and points out that multiple data collection methods are commonly found in qualitative research. She recommends member checks: asking the participants to comment on the early data and urges transparency on the researcher on 'the positions vis-à-vis the topic being studied, the basis for selecting participants, the content of the study, and what values or assumptions might affect data collection and analysis.'⁷⁰ We look at the subject of transparency in more detail in the discussion of auto-ethnography in Chapter 4.

Merriam avers that 'reliability is problematic in the social sciences simply because human behaviour is never static, nor is what *many* experience necessarily more reliable than what *one person* experiences,' but she suggests that a good degree of reliability can be established by spending adequate time in the field, to the point where the researcher achieves saturation, that is, observes the same things coming up repeatedly. She further suggests that the methods above, together with an 'audit trail', a term borrowed from finance, can offer other researchers an idea of the

⁶⁹ Denzin, Norman K. and Yvonna S. Lincoln, *Strategies of Qualitative Inquiry*, 3rd ed. (London: SAGE, 2008), p.7.

⁷⁰ Merriam, 'Assessing and Evaluating Qualitative Research', pp.25-6.

reliability of the work: 'an audit trail in a qualitative study describes in detail how data were collected, how categories were derived, and how decisions were made throughout the enquiry'.⁷¹ Here, this audit trail was provided by research journals kept both during the action and analysis phases.

The question of validity is a fundamental one in practical theology. Can what I have done and found be used elsewhere? The problem of the small sample size has to be faced for, as Merriam says, it is 'selected precisely because the researcher wishes to understand the particular in depth, not to find out what is generally true of the many'.⁷² In this work I wanted both to explore in detail the particular spiritual experience of a small group of people and to offer some examples of good practice in ministry and from the analysis, suggestions and outcomes that might influence the thinking of the church on priorities in ministry. Merriam is encouraging in this, saying that the provision of '*rich, thick description*' is a major strategy to ensure for external validity ... enough description and information that readers will be able to determine how closely their situations match, and thus whether findings can be transferred.⁷³ This rich description of process appears in Chapter 4.

The emerging story of the research

Coding the data

I used *NVivo 7* to analyse the dataset. Ann Lewins and Christina Silver have an excellent discussion of the scope and criticism of CAQDAS (Computer Assisted

⁷¹ Merriam, 'Assessing and Evaluating Qualitative Research' p.27, italics mine.

⁷² Merriam, 'Assessing and Evaluating Qualitative Research', p.28.

⁷³ Merriam, 'Assessing and Evaluating Qualitative Research', p.29 and on validity checks see also Richards, *Handling Qualitative Data: A Practical Guide*, pp.139-144.

Qualitative Data Analysis) packages in which they make clear that ‘they are not methods of analysis but provide a range of tools which can be used to facilitate various analytic processes.’⁷⁴ NVivo uses a process of marking the source material, in my case, transcriptions of interviews, and allocating the marked passages to themes identified by the researcher. This process is called ‘coding’. Lewins and Silver describe codes as ‘heuristic devices for discovery’.⁷⁵ The coding process works at several levels, often described as open, axial and selective. There is a natural progression to the work; open coding is descriptive, it could be termed ‘labelling things’, which as Lewins and Silver say, ‘fragments the data, “opening” them up into all the possible ways in which they can be understood.’ Sections of the text which are labelled as similar in nature are grouped together with a descriptive title which identifies them; these groups of similar data are called ‘nodes’.

Axial coding is a matter of ‘revisiting and comparing continually’. This may feel like the whole project is collapsing back in on itself, as you see the relationships between the coded data in new ways, theoretical ways which are at one remove from the data themselves. Selective coding describes the third and (perhaps many) further passes through the data: looking for ‘instances in the data which most pertinently illustrate themes, concepts, relationships. Conclusions are validated by illustrating instances represented by and grounded in the data. Patterns are tested and core categories in the developing theory illustrated.’⁷⁶ Ordered description tends to make

⁷⁴ Lewins, Ann and Christina Silver, *Using Software in Qualitative Research: A Step-by-Step Guide* (London: SAGE, 2007), p.82-3.

⁷⁵ Lewins and Silver, *Using Software in Qualitative Research*. p.58.

⁷⁶ Lewins and Silver, *Using Software in Qualitative Research*, pp.84-5.

a messy process sound neat and well-ordered, but there are distinct advantages in using software to navigate your way through a dataset as large as this.⁷⁷

Open coding reveals common themes.⁷⁸ One of the distinct advantages of using software at this point is the ability to ‘fracture’ or ‘slice’ the data whilst keeping the original source intact. The software also automatically displays for you the number of references at any node (the term used for a group of items coded to the same theme) so it is possible to see at a glance which of your themes are emerging as significant, useful with a large dataset and better than relying on impressions, which can be misleading. Eventually saturation point, where no new themes emerge, is reached, however, I coded all my sources, both for completeness and to honour the contribution of all my participants equally, which also increased the likelihood of sourcing apt quotations to illustrate emerging theory and argument.

Axial coding

Axial coding is done by stepping back from the dataset and looking at the relationships between the nodes themselves, asking what *type* of data is emerging? Here I found Pat Bazeley’s advice on creating a tree hierarchy invaluable.⁷⁹ Tree hierarchies may not always be necessary and software should serve research needs, rather than dictating the agenda, but for me, developing a tree hierarchy was a useful way of sorting and reflecting on the nodes. This was a fruitful and generative process which confirmed most significantly that there *was* a process being described by the

⁷⁷ Over 250,000 words of interview transcription.

⁷⁸ A table of the codes I created (called ‘nodes’ in NVivo) is given in Appendix Two.

⁷⁹ Bazeley, Pat, *Qualitative Data Analysis with Nvivo*, second ed. (London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi, Singapore: Sage, 2007), pp106-107.

data. When the nodes were reviewed, it became apparent that they could be grouped into beliefs; behaviours; contextual factors; impacts (or influences) and outcomes. The dynamic nature of these categories indicates a change process and suggests that it might be possible to map the process of change and to give a fuller picture of human spiritual maturity.⁸⁰

Selective coding

An iterative process of selective coding occurs as you write and reflect on the data, meshing with grounded theory process, as data is continually examined from new angles to build the fullest picture of what is happening. NVivo provided a lot of statistical information on the dataset; for example, how many references there are at each of the nodes, and therefore which are the most significant themes for your participants.⁸¹ It also allows the researcher to run queries on the data; interrogating the data for correspondences and differences, for example, finding whether there is a correlation between gender, or age, and a particular node, like 'reliance on God'. Software is a tool to manage large amounts of data thoroughly; it will not generate theory or do anything other than build categories unless used thoughtfully and reflexively. Analysing data is also often about seeing what is **not** there, as well as what is present.

It might be helpful at this point to give an example of how the method of selective coding was used to generate theory. In view of the question of the relationship between gender and spirituality, which emerged through this work, I spent some time querying my data for correspondences between gender and the most significant

⁸⁰ The tree hierarchy is in Appendix Three.

⁸¹ Statistical information is more relevant at this micro-level of analysis because the dataset itself is so large.

nodes. This was a project with 18 women and 6 men, approximately reflecting the division of the congregation. I would not wish to extrapolate any elaborate gender theory on this number of participants.⁸² However, I do think that the value of this type of qualitative research is in getting very close to what Meredith McGuire calls ‘lived religion’ and Jeff Astley, ‘ordinary theology.’⁸³ It gives a detailed insight into the real spiritual lives and practice of ordinary people in small Anglican rural churches. When I ran queries on gender and the node ‘reliance on God’ and gender and the node ‘spiritual experience’, I could find no gender bias - both nodes roughly reflected the division between men and women in the study. Nor could I find gender bias when I looked at anxiety about prayer. It was also possible to interrogate the data on the basis of people’s ages and queries using the criteria of ‘age’ and both ‘reliance’ and ‘spiritual experience’ showed responses are similar across the age spread. In this way, the third or ‘selective’ stage of the analysis process enabled me to reflect on the data in depth and to begin to build the theory which is illustrated in Chapter 5.

Summary

The methodology used in this research project was complex, using both ethnographic and action research methods to complete a cycle of practical theology, and also taking academic psychology and the historical spiritual tradition of Ignatius as conversation partners, in order to shed light on a complex and hitherto little-

⁸² I note here that Nicola Slee builds a theory of women’s faith development, in her book of the same name, on qualitative research with only 31 participants, all of whom were educated at higher level. Having also worked with a small scale group of both men and women, I would feel uncertain about building an overarching theory about gender and spirituality on such a small sample.

⁸³ McGuire, Meredith B., *Lived Religion: Faith and Practice in Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). Astley, Jeff, *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening and Learning in Theology* (Aldershot, UK/Burlington VT, USA: Ashgate, 2002).

researched area, that of actual spiritual experience and prayer as understood and practised in rural Anglican congregations. This methodology has enabled meaningful conclusions to be drawn, laid out in the concluding chapters. The methodology was evolved in response to the complexities of accessing an experience which most people see as a very private matter. A second, but equally important, intention was to provoke beneficial change in the spiritual lives of the participants and this necessitated the tools of action research as well as qualitative ethnographic methods. In order therefore to answer the question, ‘Can spiritual maturity be nurtured?’ we must first sketch what spiritual maturity might look like, and it is to this task we turn in Chapter 3.

Chapter 3 - Models of maturity

'It is only when faith is combined with the practical wisdom of ordinary people that religious traditions are able to make a relevant contribution to life as we are experiencing it in the twenty-first century.'⁸⁴

Wendy Tyndale

Chapter 3 defines some models of maturity from spirituality and psychology, specifically considering Ignatian practice, spiritual direction, humanistic psychology and faith development theory. The chapter concludes with my own model of spiritual maturity.

Writing in the field of the psychology of religion in 2003, Robert Emmons and Raymond Paloutzian observed that it was curious how little attention was paid to religion by psychology, considering that it is 'among the most powerful of all social forces and here as long as there have been human beings.'⁸⁵ They also noted that in the previous decade, an impressive body of material has begun to chart the increasing attention given to spirituality and religion in various subfields of psychology.⁸⁶ Much of this research has been quantitative and it is only very recently that the field has been augmented by qualitative research such as this study. They stress the importance of the inter-disciplinary approach, as 'a single disciplinary approach is incapable of yielding comprehensive knowledge of phenomena as complex and multifaceted as spirituality.'⁸⁷ In this chapter, I draw on the disciplines of Ignatian spirituality; humanistic psychology; psychology of religion and spiritual direction to

⁸⁴ Tyndale, *Visions of Development: Faith-Based Initiatives*, p.161.

⁸⁵ Emmons, Robert A. and Raymond F. Paloutzian, 'The Psychology of Religion,' 54, no. 1 (2003), p.379. See also Emmons, R. A., *The Psychology of Ultimate Concerns: Motivation and Spirituality in Personality* (New York and London: The Guilford Press, 1999), Chapter 1.

⁸⁶ Emmons and Paloutzian, 'The Psychology of Religion', p.381.

⁸⁷ Emmons and Paloutzian, 'The Psychology of Religion', p.395.

formulate some models of maturity, before proposing a model of spiritual maturity which was tested in the action research phase of the project.

Understandings of spiritual maturity

My understanding is that spiritual growth is a continual process, the ultimate goal for the believer being union with God. An ultimate union with God must, by its very nature, be beyond this earthly life, but the goal of deepening the relationship with God may be actively pursued and the possibility of nurturing that relationship in others, promoting spiritual maturity, is the subject matter of this thesis. There are many ways to undertake a spiritual journey and the particular way which is explored here is strongly influenced by Ignatian spirituality, grounded in the following of Christ and life according to the gospel. Watts, Nye and Savage acknowledge that ‘for Christians, development has often been thought of as something deliberately sought after, sometimes through following the specific disciplines of a spiritual tradition.’⁸⁸ I propose in this work that spiritual development towards what might be termed a mature faith is possible; that the trajectory of spiritual growth is towards spiritual maturity and that it is something that Christians should look for, hope for and work towards. Those with responsibility in the church, clergy and other congregational leaders, should make the nurture of the spiritual growth of others a clear ministerial priority.

The specific Christian spiritual tradition dealt with in this work is the Ignatian tradition of spiritual direction and discernment. Although my own spiritual origins

⁸⁸ Watts, Fraser N., Rebecca Nye, and Sara B. Savage, *Psychology for Christian Ministry* (London: Routledge, 2002), p.116.

are in the conservative Evangelical practice of the Church of England, I now occupy a central Anglican position, acknowledging a debt to the twentieth-century ecumenical work of the Jesuits and others in their re-presentation of the riches of Ignatian spirituality and the Spiritual Exercises of St Ignatius Loyola. It is part of my central thesis, and some of my original contribution in this area, that this spiritual tradition can be used to great effect in the Anglican parish setting. The chapter concludes with my own sketch of what spiritual maturity might look like in the ordinary Christian, drawn from my experience as a parish priest and this research. These understandings have been influenced by Ignatian spirituality, and this work is offered in the hope that Ignatian spiritual practice might benefit smaller Anglican congregations more widely.

Ignatian Spirituality and theories of maturity

Ignatius Loyola is a significant figure in the Christian spiritual tradition. He founded the Society of Jesus and his major written work, apart from the Constitutions of the Society and a huge corpus of letters is *The Spiritual Exercises*.⁸⁹ This is a book of guidance for those directing others seeking to grow in faith.⁹⁰ It is the distillation of

⁸⁹ There are a large number of translations of the Exercises from the original Spanish available. The one often used by spiritual directors in the UK is the translation by Puhl: Ignatius, of Loyola, Saint, *The Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius*, trans. Louis J. Puhl (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1951). Of the others, I have used Ignatius, of Loyola, Saint, *The Spiritual Exercises of Saint Ignatius*, trans. Anthony Mottola (New York: Doubleday, 1989); Ignatius, of Loyola, Saint, *Saint Ignatius of Loyola: Personal Writings*, trans. Joseph A. and Philip Endean Munitiz (London: Penguin, 2004). David Fleming's book includes what he terms both 'a literal translation and a contemporary reading': Fleming, David L., S.J., *Draw Me into Your Friendship: The Spiritual Exercises, a Literal Translation and a Contemporary Reading* (Saint Louis: The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1996).

⁹⁰ The book is not intended to be read through; it is a manual for those who give the Exercises to use as a reference. In this way, Ignatian spiritual practice is handed on as an oral tradition, as Ignatius himself first 'gave' the Exercises to those friends who became the first Jesuits. One does not learn Ignatian spirituality from this book, or any book primarily, but in the experience of spiritual direction and teaching within the tradition. Those who direct others using the Spiritual Exercises must first themselves have been directed through an experience of the Exercises. An experience of the

his spiritual experiences which began when he was incapacitated following an injury sustained in battle. The spiritual practices which Ignatius recommended in its pages remain influential today.

What is Ignatian spirituality?

Ignatian spirituality is rooted in the life experience of Ignatius and his major work *The Spiritual Exercises*. As Ignatius himself believed that God had acted and continued to act in his own life to bring about change and transformation, so Ignatian spirituality has at its core a belief in a God who acts in human lives and with whom human beings can have a real, and potentially transformative, relationship. This relationship with God is rooted in and shaped by prayer and it was at least in part from his personal experience of prayer that Ignatius crafted the Exercises.

The Spiritual Exercises are a series of prayerful meditations and ‘contemplations’ on different things – bible passages, events in the life of Christ and subjects of Ignatius’ own devising. They were written down as a manual for the person who guides and also to help the one who makes the Exercises themselves. They offer many different forms of prayer, although, as David Lonsdale points out, the form of prayer usually considered most characteristic of Ignatian spirituality is the imaginative contemplation. Lonsdale describes Ignatius as a man whose mind worked ‘more easily ... with stories, pictures and images’ rather than abstract theological thought and his spirituality invites us to use all our senses to visualise biblical scenes and events from Christ’s ministry and undertake other meditations using the power of our

Exercises is always contextual, and a good director will tailor the material to each retreatant as God leads the journey. There is little to be gained by reading the Exercises outside the context of spiritual guidance.

imagination. This is a form of prayer which engages the whole person.⁹¹ The purpose of these contemplations is to bring us into a deeper relationship with God, into a fuller recognition of the depth of God's love for each person, and to become ever more like the Christ we contemplate.⁹² Through this continued practice of prayer, our human lives can gradually be transformed and conformed to the likeness of Christ.

Ignatius' understanding of spiritual maturity

Ignatius does not have what might be termed a developed theory of what constitutes human spiritual maturity. His understanding of it must be inferred from hints and intimations throughout his writings. In the introductory explanations to the Exercises, Ignatius describes their purpose as 'preparing and disposing our soul to rid itself of all its disordered affections and then, after their removal, of seeking and finding God's will in the ordering of our life for the salvation of our soul.'⁹³

Ignatius' aim was to free people from attachments which displaced God or emotional and mental states, like fear and guilt, which got in the way of the relationship with God, thereby achieving a state of detachment, which might be interpreted today as freedom. It can thus be inferred that a central plank of spiritual maturity for Ignatius was the ability to make free decisions in the context of a relationship with God. The dynamic of *The Spiritual Exercises* is designed to help people grow into freedom, people who can make clear-sighted and self-aware decisions, free of disordered

⁹¹ Lonsdale, David, *Eyes To See, Ears To Hear*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000), Chapter 5, especially pp.110-111.

⁹² Aschenbrenner, George, 'Becoming Whom We Contemplate,' *The Way* Supplement 52 (1985).

⁹³ Ignatius, of Loyola, Saint, *Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works*, ed. G.J. Ganss, *Classics of Western Spirituality* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1991), p.121.

attachments to things other than God. David Lonsdale sums up this understanding of freedom:

By freedom I mean something much more like sufficient possession of ourselves so that, appreciating and relying on God's love for us, we are able to give shape to our own lives, able to commit ourselves to being the person we believe God intended us to be, and to commit ourselves to the path of life we believe God invites us, in love, to follow.⁹⁴

The dynamic of the Exercises therefore moves the exercitant in the first week from a deepened understanding of personal sin and, despite it, the depth of God's love for us; into a journey through the following three weeks which Lonsdale characterises as seeing 'more clearly the shape, in the following of Christ, that his or her life could have and therefore the direction in which freedom lies.'⁹⁵

This freedom is exercised within a context of discernment. David Lonsdale asserts that 'discernment lies at the heart of Christian spirituality,' and it involves us in 'daily attempts to make truth and love concrete realities.' In this way, 'trying to be a Christian means learning how to respond with love to God, to people and to circumstances' and as the people and circumstances around us continually change, so we are involved in a continual process of decision-making, needing continual reflexivity.⁹⁶ Lonsdale defines discernment as 'finding one's own way of discipleship in a particular set of circumstances' where there may be conflicting demands upon us and competing value systems in operation. It is, he says, a 'gift by which we are able to observe and assess the different factors in a particular situation, and to choose that course of action which most authentically answers our desire to

⁹⁴ Lonsdale, David, *Eyes To See, Ears To Hear*, pp.136-137.

⁹⁵ Lonsdale, David, *Eyes To See, Ears To Hear*, p.136.

⁹⁶ Lonsdale, David, *Eyes To See, Ears To Hear*, p.89

live by the gospel.⁹⁷ The discerning person is for Ignatius the mature person. The person who can use the process of discernment, who can make good decisions which are directed to the praise, reverence and service of God, is the person Ignatius would term as mature, and the Exercises are designed to make such a person.⁹⁸

Our picture of Ignatius' understanding of spiritual maturity can be augmented by looking at his description in the Constitutions of the kind of person the Superior General of the Society of Jesus ought to be. This might be interpreted as Ignatius describing his model of a spiritually mature person. The Superior General should be first and foremost 'intimate with God in prayer'; he should also be a virtuous, loving and humble role model; self-controlled and 'independent of all passions'; compassionate in judgment; courageous and persevering.⁹⁹ All of these qualities are to be directed to the service of God, as this is what Ignatius understands to be the purpose of each person's life, that human beings are created to praise, reverence and serve God.¹⁰⁰

The language of spiritual development towards maturity is not language Ignatius would have employed and the matter of reinterpretation is something to which we need to be continually alive. However, there is a clear sense of progression through the four 'weeks' of the Exercises.¹⁰¹ As we reinterpret Ignatius' writings today in a

⁹⁷ Lonsdale, David, *Eyes To See, Ears To Hear*, p.91.

⁹⁸ There is not scope with the confines of this thesis to go into a more detailed discussion of Ignatius' process of discernment, but see Lonsdale, David, *Eyes to See, Ears To Hear*, Chapter 4.

⁹⁹ Ignatius, *Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works*, ed. G.J. Ganss, *Constitutions*, paragraphs 723-730, pp.312-315.

¹⁰⁰ Ignatius, *Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works*, ed. G.J. *The Spiritual Exercises: Principle and Foundation*, paragraph 23, p.130.

¹⁰¹ So called because, if undertaken at one time, the Exercises would usually take 30 days, with his detailed instructions for prayer falling into four distinct movements of seven days each. In his 19th annotation to the Exercises, Ignatius makes it clear that people unable to give this commitment of time for whatever reason may also undertake the Exercises within daily life over a period of several

world which struggles to bring the spiritual and the physical together, we should note that according to Philip Endean, Ignatius sees a unity between the active and contemplative life; the contemplative life is *not* seen as superior but as mutually interdependent. He says that as the Rahner brothers examined the early accounts of Jesuit sources,

They found a form of mysticism that involved commitment to, and affirmation of, the world. Christian perfection and union with God were to be found in a co-operation between ourselves and God rather than in mystical passivity - in involvement in the world, rather than in the supposed isolation of a monastery or rarefied states of prayer.¹⁰²

The goal for Ignatius is indifference. As always, we have to be careful to interpret his language correctly. By this Spanish word *indiferente* it seems he is describing what we might now call detachment, or freedom, meaning that we should develop such a passion for God that we can sit lightly to the things of the world around us and can eventually learn to find God in all things. Philip Endean uses the image of a balance, and says that, in Ignatius' thinking, we should be 'not more inclined or disposed to take the thing proposed than to leave it.'¹⁰³

In the Constitutions, Ignatius wrote:

All should make diligent efforts to keep their intention right, not only in regard to their state of life but also in all particular details. In these they should always aim at serving and pleasing the Divine Goodness for its own sake and because of the incomparable love and benefits with which God has anticipated us, rather than for fear of punishments or hope of rewards, although they ought to draw help also from them. Further, they should often be exhorted to seek God our Lord in all things, stripping off from themselves the love of creatures to the extent that this is possible, in order to turn their

months, provided there is an experienced guide willing to accompany them in this way. Nowadays this is quite a common way for people to complete the full Exercises.

¹⁰² Endean, *Karl Rahner and Ignatian Spirituality*, p.73.

¹⁰³ Endean, *Karl Rahner and Ignatian Spirituality*, p.18.

love upon the Creator of them, by loving him in all creatures and all of them in him, in conformity with his holy and divine will.’¹⁰⁴

The whole of paragraphs 276-291 of the Constitutions is given over to an understanding of spiritual progress. In the Annotations, the name given to the introductory explanations at the beginning of *The Spiritual Exercises*, Ignatius indicates the frame of mind in which spiritual growth should be sought:

The persons who receive the Exercises will benefit greatly by entering upon them with great spirit and generosity toward their Creator and Lord, and by offering all their desires and freedom to him so that his Divine Majesty can make use of their persons and of all they possess in whatsoever way is according to his most holy will. (*Fifth Annotation*)¹⁰⁵

I take Ignatius here to be describing something akin to what I have designated surrender. We can also see the shape of this commitment to spiritual progress in the prayer from the *Contemplatio* (usually called in English the *Contemplation On Divine Love*) which Ignatius places in the Fourth Week of the Exercises, known as the *Suscipe* (*Take and Receive Prayer*):

Take Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and my entire will – all that I have and call my own. You have given it all to me. To you, Lord, I return it. Everything is yours; do with it what you will. Give me only your love and your grace. That is enough for me.¹⁰⁶

In terms of the outworking of our spiritual development, Ignatius sees Christ as our template and our discipleship as conforming to those canonical norms, but expressed in a myriad practical outcomes. Modras says that although we no longer share so many of Ignatius' 'basic assumptions' in terms of world-view and context, Ignatian spirituality remains a 'dynamic living tradition', ... 'thanks in great measure to its

¹⁰⁴ Ignatius, *Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works*, ed. G. J. Ganss, see p.292 - from Part 3 of the Constitutions, Chapter 1, which deals with 'The Preservation and Progress of Those who are in Probation', Section 26, paragraph 288.

¹⁰⁵ Ignatius, *Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works*, p.122.

¹⁰⁶ Fleming's 'contemporary reading' translation from: Fleming, *Draw Me into Your Friendship: The Spiritual Exercises, a Literal Translation and a Contemporary Reading*, p.177.

deep-seated humanism with its aptitude for accommodation.'¹⁰⁷ This ability to 'accommodate' derives directly from Ignatius' own instructions that the giving of the exercises should be tailored to each exercitant, as uniquely created by God. The one giving the exercises should see themselves as a guide and companion, and strive not to obstruct God's dealings with each person. This 'accommodation' to people in their own context and time has secured the relevance of Ignatian spirituality over the centuries.

The cultural presuppositions of the Exercises

The Spiritual Exercises originated in a culture very different from ours. Some translation not just of language but of concepts, modes of thinking and categories of description is necessary for them to be of full use to us. David Lonsdale discusses the interpretation of *The Spiritual Exercises*, stressing Ignatian spirituality as 'a living tradition' and its interpretation is 'a way of rediscovering its riches and potential for giving life.'¹⁰⁸ He indicates two potential pitfalls: the adoption of a pick and mix approach, reducing interpretation to a matter of personal taste, although he indicates that 'Ignatius intended *The Spiritual Exercises* to be adapted to different people, needs and circumstances.'¹⁰⁹ Another pitfall might be a too-literal interpretation, forgetting how the source texts were shaped by 'the personal, social cultural and ecclesial circumstances' in which they appeared and he says, 'to make uncritical use of the theology of the Exercises, belonging as it does to the sixteenth century, may in

¹⁰⁷ Modras, *Ignatian Humanism: A Dynamic Spirituality for the 21st Century*, p.286.

¹⁰⁸ Lonsdale, David, *Eyes to See, Ears to Hear: An Introduction to Ignatian Spirituality*, [Rev. & updated ed., *Traditions of Christian Spirituality*. (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2000), p.21-33.

¹⁰⁹ Lonsdale, *Eyes to See, Ears to Hear*, p.23.

fact make them an oppressive and harmful experience for a modern person, the very opposite of what Ignatius intended.'¹¹⁰

Howard Gray also discusses these 'cultural presuppositions', recommending sensitivity to the original context and awareness of what needs recontextualising'¹¹¹ He gives the example of Ignatius describing the 'enemy conducting himself like a woman;' language of a pre-psychological and pre-feminist age which we can re-interpret.¹¹² Similarly in the *Rules for Thinking with the Church*, unquestioning obedience to the church is assumed by Ignatius, something which contemporary society rejects.¹¹³ As Gray says: 'The text needs some interpretation, some contextualization, some relevant contemporary examples to make the symbols, language or theology intelligible, a help for prayer, and an available way to find God's will.'¹¹⁴

A major recent reinterpretation of the Exercises has been *The Spiritual Exercises Reclaimed*, by Katherine Dyckman, Mary Garvin and Elizabeth Liebert. They have confronted the male imagery of the text and uncovered, as the subtitle suggests, 'liberating possibilities for women.'¹¹⁵ The matter of reinterpretation is a serious one, as we do not and cannot share the mindset of 16th century Counter-Reformation Spain. This is in itself a hermeneutical process. Marie McCarthy suggests we employ a hermeneutics of suspicion when seeking to evaluate what is authentically

¹¹⁰ Lonsdale, *Eyes to See, Ears to Hear*, p.24.

¹¹¹ Gray, Howard, 'Changing Structures,' *The Way Supplement* 76 (1993), p.72.

¹¹² See Ignatius, *Saint Ignatius of Loyola: Personal Writings*, Paragraph 325, Rule 12, p.350.

¹¹³ Ignatius, *Saint Ignatius of Loyola: Personal Writings*, Paragraph 325, Rule 12, p.356.

¹¹⁴ Gray, 'Changing Structures', p.73.

¹¹⁵ Dyckman, Katherine, Mary Garvin, and Elizabeth Liebert, *The Spiritual Exercises Reclaimed: Uncovering Liberating Possibilities for Women* (New York/Mahwah: Paulist, 2001). They deal with the problems and possibilities of reinterpreting the text in Chapter One, suggesting that three levels of interpretation are required: exegetical, critical and hermeneutical, see especially p.11ff.

spiritual, and also a hermeneutics of restoration to 'help us find effective ways of putting our lives in dialogue with the tradition.'¹¹⁶ This has been one of the purposes of this research, to put contemporary Anglican practice into dialogue with Ignatian traditions and contemporary Ignatian practice, but this needs to be done bearing in mind Philip Sheldrake's warning that 'our Christian spiritual tradition is a flawed reality that demands careful reinterpretation.'¹¹⁷ It is perhaps worth noting at this point that although Ignatius used a lot of androcentric and military imagery that is challenging today, he did not himself exclude women from his thinking. Ronald Modras points out that many of the first to undertake the Exercises were women and many of his more than 2,000 extant letters giving spiritual advice are addressed to women.¹¹⁸ Nevertheless, caution is required, not least

Because the past acts as a mirror for our present, a revision of our historical perspectives and an attempt to reach as full a picture as possible, is vital if our establishment of a contemporary spiritual identity is not to repeat the oppressions of the past in new ways by preventing others from having a history and, therefore, a proper identity at all.¹¹⁹

Ignatian practice and its contribution to spiritual growth

The Exercises are intended to help us grow spiritually and they themselves and the spiritual practices which flow from them have been widely used in churches in recent years. Ignatian practice describes those spiritual habits and disciplines which are

¹¹⁶ McCarthy, 'Spirituality in a Postmodern Era', p.203.

¹¹⁷ Sheldrake, Philip, *Spirituality and History: Questions of Interpretation and Method*, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1998), p. 91 and see the whole discussion of Chapter 4.

¹¹⁸ See Modras, Ronald E., *Ignatian Humanism: A Dynamic Spirituality for the 21st Century* (Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 2004). particularly the introduction. Also, see for example Ignatius' letters to Teresa Rejadell, also: Endean, Philip, 'Discerning Behind the Rules: Ignatius's First Letter to Teresa Rejadell,' *The Way* 64 (1989). Dyckman, Garvin and Liebert have an interesting discussion of his relationship with some of his women contemporaries – see Dyckman, Garvin, and Liebert, *The Spiritual Exercises Reclaimed: Uncovering Liberating Possibilities for Women*, p.29ff.

¹¹⁹ Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History: Questions of Interpretation and Method*, p.110.

rooted in the prayer practices of *The Spiritual Exercises*: making an examen; imaginative contemplation, and the process of discernment. We might also include formation for discipleship which follows the original Ignatian pattern of spiritual companionship, where someone who has already made the Exercises themselves gives the Exercises in turn to others. This usually happens in the one-to-one setting of spiritual direction and so is outside the remit of this thesis, although some reference is made in the concluding chapter to the use of *The Spiritual Exercises* in corporate settings.

Ignatian spiritual practice ‘gives shape to personal and corporate life, through an integration of contemplation and action,’ and to follow the way set out by Ignatius means following ‘a path of reflective discipleship in that reflection on encounters with God in prayer and in life form the basis on which personal and communal choices are made.’¹²⁰ The practice of Ignatian methods of prayer and contemplation contribute to our becoming discerning and reflective people, who can make decisions in freedom

Ignatius considered the examen to be essential in the life of prayer, although Donald St Louis remarks that it needs to be seen within the ‘larger sweep of Ignatius’ theology’ as it is ‘fundamentally a prayer of discernment, a vitally illuminating and dynamic experience of prayerful reflection that both celebrates and enhances one’s awareness of and response to the Lord who is ever-present in our human

¹²⁰ Sheldrake, Philip, ed. *The New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, (London: SCM, 2005), p. 356.

experience.’¹²¹ The examen is a reflection on the events of the day, an examination of our consciousness, which Dennis Hamm SJ rather engagingly describes as, ‘rummaging for God; praying backwards through your day.’¹²² Aschenbrenner describes it as ‘a daily intensive exercise of discernment.’¹²³ It should be noted that what is examined is our consciousness; the purpose is to reflect on our experiences and our awareness of God as it has ebbed and flowed through the day. It is not an examination of conscience, with that word’s rather narrower moral overtones.

Ignatius taught a five-fold pattern for the examen, beginning with thanksgiving, then prayer for enlightenment, to see one’s actions and, as Ignatius terms it; ‘to ask for grace to know my sins and to rid myself of them.’¹²⁴ The third movement is to review the events of the day, looking first for the presence of God and paying particular attention to feelings as they emerge. The fourth movement takes us deeper into an aspect of the prayer which has most engaged the attention and asking for forgiveness where we become aware of failings. Lastly we look towards the future in the light of our prayer. Prayer, in Ignatius’ understanding of it, always results in action, and a deeper desire to serve God. Aschenbrenner describes this growth as an ever-increasing ability to ‘recognise even more the subtle ways in which the Lord will greet us and to hear his Word call us in the existential situation of the future and to respond to his call with more faith, humility, and courage.’¹²⁵ Thus we see that key contributions of the examen to spiritual growth are: an increase in the ability to

¹²¹ St Louis, Donald, ‘The Ignatian Examen’, in Philip Sheldrake SJ (ed.), *The Way of Ignatius Loyola: Contemporary Approaches to the Spiritual Exercises*, (London: SPCK, 1991), p.154.

¹²² Hamm, Dennis, SJ, ‘Rummaging for God: Praying Backwards Through Your Day’, in George W. Traub, SJ (ed.) *An Ignatian Spirituality Reader*, (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2008).

¹²³ Aschenbrenner, George, ‘Consciousness Examen’, *Review for Religious* 31, 1 (1972), p. 14.

¹²⁴ Ignatius, *Spiritual Exercises and Selected Works*, ed. G. J. Ganss, *The Spiritual Exercises*, paragraph 43, p. 134.

¹²⁵ Aschenbrenner, George, ‘Consciousness Examen’, p.20

be reflexive, a deepening of self-knowledge and the growth of the desire to live more fully within the will of God and to serve God better. It was the aim of this research project to explore whether this type of spiritual growth, already proven in the context of Ignatian spiritual direction, could also be nurtured in the context of the small rural Anglican congregation.

The Ignatian practices of examen and imaginative contemplation of biblical passages were used during the active research phase of this project, because they are key ways in which people have been drawn into real encounters with God in the person of Jesus, which they have experienced as authentic and life-changing. Ignatian practice is transformative because it continually invites us into an encounter with God (in prayer and contemplation) and with our true self (particularly through the Examen), and as we learn the process of discernment, so we are enabled to make increasingly mature judgments about how to live our lives, day by day. David Lonsdale succinctly sums up the aim of Ignatius' Exercises as being 'to enable Christians to order their lives in freedom before God,' and in order to do so, the book 'offers a pattern of prayer, meditation, contemplation and reflection, arranged so as to lead people into an increasingly profound experience and understanding of the mystery of God manifest in Jesus, to reflect on their lives in the light of that, and from there to move to making discerning Christian choices.'¹²⁶

How Ignatian spiritual practice was used in the action research phase

Ignatian practices of prayer were used extensively in *Exploring Prayer* and the sermon series included historical information about Ignatius and teaching about *The*

¹²⁶ Sheldrake, Philip, ed. *The New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, p.355.

Spiritual Exercises. Five sessions in the course were based on Ignatian material: an imaginative bible meditation; the examen; making good decisions; discernment and distractions and moving into freedom. Often the material was used without specific reference to Ignatius, and sometimes it was woven in with other input. The intention was to keep the prayer course wide-ranging, but in the untidy way that ethnographic projects unfold, it occurred to me part-way through the course that this would mean I would be able to draw comparisons on the reception of Ignatian and non-Ignatian material. Ignatian material included in the sermons was therefore more clearly identified as such. The intention was to encourage the development of personal prayer practices which would be liberating rather than restricting participants. Through cultivating openness and availability, we can grow in God and 'to help us attain this precious gift, Ignatius offers us his style of praying, a style which becomes a way of life.'¹²⁷

Psychological models of human maturity

I turn now to examine an understanding of human maturity from psychology. Scientific psychology considers that there is a process of human development, though different branches of psychology adopt different starting points and describe development and the human person differently. Humanistic psychology takes a more positive view of what it is to be human than other branches of psychology. Some of its foremost thinkers have been part of the human potential movement, a movement drawing together humanist theories and forming a third major strand after psychoanalysis and behaviourism. In this work the focus is on adult spiritual

¹²⁷ Coutinho, 'St. Ignatius of Loyola on Psychological and Spiritual Wholeness', p.46.

practice, an aspect of life which has received less psychological scrutiny, so models of childhood development are not considered.

The mindset of humanistic psychology is well-suited to making an interdisciplinary comparison of models of maturity with the social sciences and theology because of its emphasis on the positive nature of human existence, rather than concentrating on human neuroses or aberrant behaviour. The human potential movement is so called because its major proponents believe that human beings have a tendency towards self-fulfilment, a process termed 'self-actualisation'. This notion of the fulfilment of potential clearly includes the concept of trajectory or development and it is this possibility that I want to trace within the spiritual life. In secular academic psychology, self-actualisation is characterised as an inner human need, unrelated to any external reality. Humanistic psychology posits human beings as basically good or at least neutral, rather than fundamentally evil or flawed. Glassman and Hadad describe humanistic psychology as having three basic assumptions: 'a phenomenological viewpoint [how the person sees the world]; a belief in the capacity for choice, and an emphasis on meaning.' They continue: 'Only the individual can explain the meaning of a particular behaviour. ... The argument is that *all data*, being gathered by human beings, are inherently *subjective*, and must be regarded as such.'¹²⁸ If their statement that only the individual can explain the meaning of their behaviour is accepted, it is a logical corollary to undertake research to uncover the meanings that human beings ascribe to a particular behaviour; in this case, the practice of prayer. First, we look in more detail at the contours and development of human maturity in humanistic psychology.

¹²⁸ Glassman, William E. and Marilyn Hadad, *Approaches to Psychology*, 5th ed. (London: McGraw-Hill, 2009), p.279.

Models of maturity in humanistic psychology

Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers were key thinkers in the field of humanistic psychology. Contemporaries in early twentieth century in America, Rogers outlived Maslow by 17 years. Pervin and John characterise Maslow as 'perhaps the major theorist' within humanistic psychology.¹²⁹ In a seminal work, *Motivation and Personality*, Maslow put forward his theory of self-actualising people and established what has become known as his 'hierarchy of needs'.¹³⁰ In chapter 4 of *A Theory of Human Motivation*, he sets out the 'foundation of a system of intrinsic human values, human goods that validate themselves, that are intrinsically good and desirable and that need no further justification. This is a hierarchy of values which are to be found in the very essence of human nature itself.'¹³¹ He establishes his hierarchy of human needs that have to be met in order for a person to become fully human: firstly the physiological needs (hunger, thirst, sex); then safety (security, stability, dependency, freedom from fear); belongingness and love (relationships, friendship); esteem (self-respect and the esteem of others); and then finally self-actualisation. 'Self-actualisation' as a concept originated in the work of Kurt Goldstein, who worked with both healthy and brain-damaged individuals in World War I, but Don Browning suggests that the later humanistic psychologies took his description of what he saw as a 'tendency' and turned it into a normative ethical concept.¹³² Maslow elaborates:

This term, first used by Kurt Goldstein is being used in this book in a much more specific and limited fashion. It refers to man's [sic] desire for self-fulfilment, namely to the tendency for him to become actualised in what he is potentially. This tendency might be phrased as the desire to become more

¹²⁹ Pervin, Lawrence A. and Oliver P. John, *Personality: Theory and Research*, 8th ed. (New York, Chichester: Wiley, 2001). p.208.

¹³⁰ Maslow, Abraham H., *Motivation and Personality*, Second ed. (New York, Evanston and London: Harper and Row, 1970).

¹³¹ Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, Preface p.xiii.

¹³² Browning, Don S. and Terry D. Cooper, *Religious Thought and the Modern Psychologies*, 2nd. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), see p.62 and specifically on Maslow, p.64.

and more capable of what one idiosyncratically is, to become everything that one is capable of becoming.¹³³

Browning describes what he sees as Maslow's drift from 'the assertion that the tendency towards self-actualisation *is* the basic nature of humans to the assertion that it is *good* and that, therefore, all humans *should* pursue the life of self-actualisation.' Interestingly in the context of this discussion of the shape of human maturity, he points out that Goldstein had actually 'tended to equate complete self-actualisation with immaturity and held that some degree of self-renunciation and self-restriction is an imperative that must counterbalance self-actualisation.'¹³⁴

Maslow does allow for some deviations from this fixed hierarchy; for some people, self-esteem may be more important than love; creativity a greater driver than anything else in some people; some seem to have permanently lowered aspirations; there might be a psychopathic loss of love response; there might be such a satiety of a need that it leads to loss of awareness of it; and lastly he delineates people who are prepared to give up basic needs for ideals.¹³⁵ These seem to me to be very significant exceptions to what he claims as a 'normative tendency' to self-actualisation, particularly in the case of people who are prepared to forgo some basic needs on a matter of principle: one thinks of the large number of people imprisoned for matters of conscience in recent decades. However, for Maslow, psychological health is inextricably bound up with the need to become self-actualising: 'a healthy man [*sic*] is primarily motivated by his needs to develop and actualise his fullest potentialities and capacities.'¹³⁶

¹³³ Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, p.46.

¹³⁴ Browning and Cooper, *Religious Thought and the Modern Psychologies*, pp.65-66.

¹³⁵ Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, see pages 51-53.

¹³⁶ Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, p.57.

Just as the tree needs sunshine and water and food, so do most people need love, safety and other basic need gratifications that can come only from without. But once these external satisfiers are obtained, once these inner deficiencies are satiated by outside satisfiers, the true problem of individual human development begins, e.g. self-actualisation.¹³⁷

He acknowledged that self-actualisation was 'a difficult syndrome to describe accurately', but that self-actualizers are people who have gratified all their basic needs: 'this is to say that all subjects felt safe and unanxious [sic], accepted, loved and loving, respect-worthy and respected, and that they had worked out their philosophical, religious or axiological bearings.'¹³⁸ He lists the features of the 'self-actualiser': acceptance (of self, others and nature); spontaneity, simplicity and naturalness; problem-centred rather than ego-centred; detachment or the need for privacy; autonomy, independence of culture and environment, will and active agent; continued freshness of appreciation; mystic (peak) experiences; *gemeinschaftsgefühl* (a word coined by Alfred Adler) - 'a deep feeling of identification, sympathy and affection for human beings, resulting in a genuine desire to help the human race'; profound interpersonal relations; a democratic character (i.e. 'friendly with anyone of suitable character regardless of class, education, political belief, race or colour. '; discrimination between means and ends, good and evil; a philosophical, unhostile sense of humour; creativeness [sic] and resistance to enculturation, the transcendence of any particular culture.¹³⁹ Here we have an encapsulation of what Maslow saw as mature human behaviour, although famously he offers only a handful of examples of people functioning at this high level.

In a significant contrast to the model of spiritual maturity which I propose below, Maslow commented that, 'Growth-motivated people may actually be *hampered* by

¹³⁷ Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, p.162.

¹³⁸ Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, p.150-1.

¹³⁹ Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, see p.155ff.

others. The determinants of satisfaction and of the good life are for them now inner-individual and *not* social. They have become strong enough to be independent of the good opinion of other people, or even of their affection.¹⁴⁰ This is a rather different view of ultimate human flourishing from my model which includes elements of interdependence, humility and surrender to God, however, it should also be noted that a mature and robust spirituality may also serve to make us more independent of others, more courageous about standing alone or speaking out against injustice and the status quo. This possibility is further considered in Chapter 5; here we note Maslow's very individualistic view of human development, a view which Jeremy Carrette roundly criticizes: 'Maslow and humanistic psychology were putting forward a new kind of private "religion" of the self.'¹⁴¹ He suggests that 'Maslow's psychology was caught in a wider post-war market demand for a re-thinking of traditional values in order to make them compatible with capitalistic ideology' and criticises him for creating 'the idea of "religion" according to euphoric dimensions, rather than the complex patterns of formation found in many cultural traditions, which develop from the integration and meditation on suffering.'¹⁴² This is a side comment in a book majoring on the knowledge economy, but the remark is pertinent here, as the formative effects of coping with suffering emerged as a key aspect of spiritual maturing in my research.¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ Maslow, *Motivation and Personality*, p.162.

¹⁴¹ Carrette, Jeremy, *Religion and Critical Psychology: Religious Experience in the Knowledge Economy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), p.161.

¹⁴² Carrette, *Religion and Critical Psychology: Religious Experience in the Knowledge Economy*, pp 144-147.

¹⁴³ This and other factors contributing to spiritual development are explored in Chapter 5.

Like Maslow, Carl Rogers believed that the human being was fundamentally benign and that human beings should ideally be self-actualising. In *Client-Centred Therapy*, he asserts:

The organism has one basic tendency and striving - to actualise, maintain and enhance the experiencing organism. Rather than many needs and motives, it seems entirely possible that all organic and psychological needs may be described as partial aspects of this one fundamental need.¹⁴⁴

Later, in *On Becoming A Person*, he details how years of experience in psychotherapy have led him to elaborate on this, suggesting that if the therapeutic relationship can be genuine and transparent; 'warmly accepting' and 'prizing' the other, and sensitively able to see the world from the other's point of view, then the other will move towards outcomes he has delineated: experience and understand aspects of the self that have previously been repressed; become better integrated; able to function more effectively; become 'more similar to the person he [sic] would like to be'; more self-directing and confident; more of a person, unique and self-expressive; able to cope with problems more adequately.¹⁴⁵ Rogers also indicates outcomes like valuing the self more highly; being less stressed or defensive and being observably more mature.¹⁴⁶ His chapter '*What it means to become a person*' describes these aspects of maturity: the individual becomes more open to experience; trusts themselves more; increasingly comes to feel that the locus of evaluation lies within; more content to be a *process* rather than a *product*.¹⁴⁷ Particularly telling is the comment about trusting oneself: 'the person increasingly discovers that his [sic] own organism is trustworthy, that it is a suitable instrument for discovering the most

¹⁴⁴ Rogers, Carl R., *Client-Centred Therapy* (London: Constable, 1951), pp.487-488.

¹⁴⁵ Rogers, Carl R., *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy* (London: Constable, 1961), p.37-8.

¹⁴⁶ Rogers, *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy*, p.36.

¹⁴⁷ Rogers, *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy*, pp.115-122.

satisfying behaviour in each immediate situation.¹⁴⁸ Like Maslow, for Rogers the mature human person is someone who has all the resources they need *within* themselves. Surrender to a being acknowledged as greater than ourselves would certainly not feature in this model of maturity, however the comment about being content to be a process rather than a product is an interesting one, to which we return in the concluding chapter.

In the UK, Brian Thorne has taken Rogers' later work seriously and recently suggested that person-centred therapy is in itself a spiritual discipline.¹⁴⁹ It is a mark of the historical gap between religion and psychology that up to 1991, Thorne had felt unable to speak freely about his faith, but decided to make his position clear in a series of Good Friday addresses, which have been made available in a later book, *Person-Centred Counselling and Christian Spirituality*.¹⁵⁰ Not only is his overt Christianity a challenge to the therapeutic establishment, his work also challenges the Church of England to accept that it is 'at best, peripheral and at worst, irrelevant' in today's society. Thorne, however, remains a person of hope: his 2002 book is subtitled *Hope Beyond Despair* and he sets forth, in prophetic fashion, what he terms his 'twelve new commandments' for the 'person of tomorrow', building on Rogers' 1980 work.¹⁵¹ These 'twelve commandments' can be construed as a description of what Thorne sees as spiritual maturity and they are full of risk-taking, concern for the natural world and challenge to the status quo. Taking inspiration from what he sees as the counter-cultural aspects of Christ's actions, he speculates that 'any person-

¹⁴⁸ Rogers, *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy*, p.118.

¹⁴⁹ See Thorne, Brian, *The Mystical Power of Person-Centred Therapy: Hope Beyond Despair* (London: Whurr, 2002).

¹⁵⁰ Thorne, Brian, *Person-Centred Counselling and Christian Spirituality: The Secular and the Holy, Counselling and Psychotherapy Series*. (London: Whurr, 1998).

¹⁵¹ See Thorne, *The Mystical Power of Person-Centred Therapy: Hope Beyond Despair*, p.35, citing Rogers, Carl R., *A Way of Being* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980).

centred therapist who is bold enough to embrace such a way of being or to proclaim it as a model for others will receive a hostile reception in many quarters.'¹⁵² Yet despite his proclamation of faith, he continues to construe human flourishing without reference to God. He describes a way of being which follows the counter-cultural ways of Jesus of Nazareth's earthly life without acknowledging the possibility of the demands that a relationship with a transcendent God might make upon us.

So what is the significance of Maslow, Rogers and Thorne for this work on spirituality? Humanistic psychology has had a far-reaching impact on Western society. Don Browning suggests that the cultural impact of humanistic psychology has been 'probably more extensive' than that of psychoanalysis and that, 'it is commonly acknowledged that Maslow had a direct, almost unmediated impact upon the churches [in the US] just as he did on the culture as a whole.'¹⁵³ Paul Vitz makes a bold critique of humanistic psychology, which he characterises as 'selfism': 'Humanistic selfism is not a science but a popular secular substitute religion which has nourished and spread today's widespread cult of self-worship'.¹⁵⁴ Vitz sees Rogers as having the most impact of the 'self-theorists', particularly with regard to what he sees as the undermining of belief in God: 'Roger's key concept of "unconditional self-regard" is simply a transformation of devout believers' conviction of God's unconditional love for them and the command that they attempt unconditional love of God in return into a full-fledged self-devotion.'¹⁵⁵ He gives what he calls a 'Christian critique' of 'selfism', which he describes as idolatry and he identifies what he sees as the inadequacy of humanistic psychology's response to

¹⁵² Thorne, *The Mystical Power of Person-Centred Therapy: Hope Beyond Despair*, p.35.

¹⁵³ Browning and Cooper, *Religious Thought and the Modern Psychologies*, p.57 and p.61.

¹⁵⁴ Vitz, Paul C., *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship* Second ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan and Carlisle, UK: Eerdmans/Paternoster, 1977), p.141.

¹⁵⁵ Vitz, *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship*, p.109.

suffering: 'Selfist philosophy trivialises life by claiming that suffering ... is without intrinsic meaning'.¹⁵⁶ Christianity and, in his view, all 'the great religions' both accept the reality of suffering and find ways to transcend and transform it. 'Through the Christian's losing his or her ordinary self in discipleship, in the imitation of Christ, such suffering can serve as the experience out of which a higher spiritual life is attained.'¹⁵⁷ In this critique we see again an allusion to the idea that surrender to God may help us to make sense of life, especially in the challenging area of suffering.

So, the main characteristics of these models of maturity are self-reliance and self-fulfilment, with a trajectory leading away from the communal into the realisation of personal needs. Development to maturity is seen as both self-driven and hierarchical, in that developmental stages are seen as successive, particularly in Maslow's theory. These models are deemed applicable to all humanity and the possibility of their being both culturally and socially contextual is not entertained, however I consider their cross-cultural relevance to be doubtful.¹⁵⁸ The models can be further critiqued on two grounds; that of failing to address the human belief in a transcendent Other who might influence our actions and intentions, and also that of promulgating what might now be seen as an androcentric mindset as a universal given.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁶ Vitz, *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship*, p.126.

¹⁵⁷ Vitz, *Psychology as Religion: The Cult of Self-Worship*, p.139.

¹⁵⁸ This would require further research of a nature outside the remit of this project.

¹⁵⁹ On this last point we might consider Simon Baron-Cohen's work on brain gender: Baron-Cohen, Simon, *The Essential Difference* (London: Penguin Group, 2004) and also Nicola Slee's work on the process of women's faith development, where she sets her research results in the context of psychodynamic theories: Slee, Nicola, *Women's Faith Development: Patterns and Processes* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), especially Chapter 2.

Faith development theory

Faith development theory is an aspect of the dialogue between religion and psychology which has been very significant in recent years, its architect and major proponent being James Fowler.

James Fowler's stages of faith

The theologian James Fowler was influenced by Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development and sought to apply it in a religious context.¹⁶⁰ Drawing insights from both Piaget's cognitive theory of childhood development and Kohlberg's theory on moral development, Fowler decided that there were stages of faith which were identifiable and predictable. Like Erikson, he considered that there were challenges to be dealt with at stage transition points, and that mature faith would result from dealing with these challenges effectively. Like Kohlberg, he thought that not all people would progress through all the stages but that progression through the stages would be invariant. Those who reached Fowler's final stage achieved 'universalising faith', a state of self-actualisation and self-transcendence. Just as Maslow had put forward named individuals who for him epitomised self-actualisation, so Fowler identified certain people who for him had reached this stage of universalising faith: Thomas Merton, Martin Luther King, Gandhi, Mother Teresa. His first contribution to this field was the seminal *Stages of Faith*, which spawned a huge amount of critique of and further research in the US and UK into faith

¹⁶⁰ There is not space within the scope of this work to go into further details into Erikson's work. There is a useful overview of his thought in: Batson, C. Daniel, Patricia Schoenrade, and W. Larry Ventis, *Religion and the Individual: A Social-Psychological Perspective*, [Rev. ed. (New York; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), see p.67ff. and Erikson's own works: *Childhood and Society* (New York: Norton, 1950) and 'Identity and the Life Cycle' in *Psychological Issues* Vol. 1, 1959.

development from contributors within and outside the churches.¹⁶¹ Fowler continues to work in this area, responding to critics in various ways.¹⁶² Good recent summaries of Fowler's work can be found in Jeff Astley's *The Psychology of Faith Development* and Stephen Parker's *Research in Fowler's Faith Development Theory: A Review Article*.¹⁶³ Osmer and Schweitzer describe Fowler's work as able to 'set forth far-reaching critical analyses of the shortcomings of contemporary culture and religions as well as powerful perspectives for overcoming such weaknesses.'¹⁶⁴ This study sets out a rather more critical reading of Fowler's work.

Fowler posited stages, which begin in childhood and continue through adolescence (which is outside the remit of this work) into adulthood. Stages 0 to 4 cover the development to adulthood, but in his theory, some adults are believed to stay at stage 3 all their lives. The stages are:

Stage 0 – Primal Faith - a pre-verbal stage in children

Stage 1 - Intuitive-Projective Faith – a child's egocentric way of thinking

Stage 2 – Mythic-Literal Faith – connecting to the stories and symbols of faith

Stage 3 – Synthetic-Conventional Faith – strong interpersonal connections, authority located in leaders, strong but tacit belief.

¹⁶¹ Fowler, James W., *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (New York: Harper Collins, 1981).

¹⁶² See particularly: Fowler, James W., *Faith Development and Pastoral Care* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987); Fowler, James W., 'The Vocation of Faith Developmental Theory,' in *Stages of Faith and Religious Development: Implications for Church, Education and Society*, ed. James W. Fowler, Karl Ernst Nipkow and Friedrich Schweitzer (London: SCM, 1992); Fowler, James W., Karl Ernst Nipkow, and Friedrich Schweitzer, eds., *Stages of Faith and Religious Development: Implications for Church, Education and Society* (London: SCM, 1992).

¹⁶³ Astley, Jeff, 'The Psychology of Faith Development,' *International Handbooks of Religion and Education* 3, no. 2 (2009). Parker, S., 'Research in Fowler's Faith Development Theory: A Review Article,' *Review of Religious Research* 51, no. 3 (2010).

¹⁶⁴ Osmer, Richard R. and Friedrich Schweitzer, eds., *Developing a Public Faith: New Directions in Practical Theology* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2003), p.7.

The remaining 3 stages would usually be associated with adult development and they are of more interest to us here:

Stage 4 – Individuative-Reflective faith – exploring and examining one’s faith

Stage 5 – Conjunctive faith – an ability to take multiple perspective, emerges in middle age if at all

Stage 6 – Universalising faith – rare; inclusive of all being

A critique of Fowler’s theory is that his understanding of the word ‘faith’ is too broad. Parker has said that Fowler's understanding is of faith 'not as a set of beliefs but as a universal human activity.'¹⁶⁵ Others have suggested that his theory is based too much in the framework of cognitive development.¹⁶⁶ In considering the validity of his stage theory, does a distinction needs to be made between faith development and spiritual development; can faith be developed aside from a set of beliefs? Would it be possible to characterise someone as mature in faith but spiritually immature?

Elizabeth Liebert points out that in spirituality, a higher stage of development is not necessarily holier; children may be holy although they may not have developed what we would call maturity; 'one could be holy at any developmental stage, but holiness will be manifested differently at each stage.'¹⁶⁷ I have used the word ‘spiritual’ rather than ‘faith’ development, because I consider that the word ‘faith’ is closely allied to the cognitive content of belief, and the expression ‘faith development’ is now indelibly associated with Fowler’s theory, whereas spirituality is an overarching

¹⁶⁵ Parker, 'Research in Fowler's Faith Development Theory: A Review Article,' p.234.

¹⁶⁶ Astley, 'The Psychology of Faith Development,' p.239.

¹⁶⁷ Liebert, Elizabeth, *Changing Life Patterns: Adult Development in Spiritual Direction* (New York and Mahwahm N.J.: Paulist, 1992), p.34.

term, describing both how the content of faith is understood and lived out and also how it is emotionally experienced.

Recently, Fowler's theory has been criticised as being inadequate in the face of globalised culture. Hintersteiner critiques stage theory in that very few adults could be said to be at stages 5 or 6, suggesting that faith development theory is helpful in understanding the development to adulthood but less helpful in understanding middle age and late adulthood:

In the face of today's highly differentiated, individualized and pluralised biographies, developmental theories based on traditional assignments of age and on ideal stages of life are not capable of depicting religious developments in a satisfying way. Moreover, stage theories often fail to take cohort effects into account, e.g., particular conditions of socialization in different generations.¹⁶⁸

He says that context is vital and challenges the idea of invariant stages, claiming that people can regress and often do in middle and later life.¹⁶⁹ He suggests that the boundaries in life are becoming 'porous' with 'multiple religious belonging becoming a feature of the globalised world'.¹⁷⁰ He concludes that the 'current global cultural context is characterised by a high degree of instability and discontinuity, against which stage of life theories .. clearly lose their feasibility and conceptual capacity....Therefore we need a much more complexified theory of the stages of life, which emphasises patterns of development that are found in particular cultural and historical settings as universal rules'.¹⁷¹

¹⁶⁸ Hintersteiner, Norbert, 'Stages of Life' Theories Faced with Globalized Culture,' *Concilium* 5 - Stages of Life and Christian Experience (2007), p.41.

¹⁶⁹ We shall look further at this possibility below, particularly with reference to Goodman's *'The Path of Prayer'*.

¹⁷⁰ Hintersteiner, 'Stages of Life' Theories Faced with Globalized Culture,' p.42.

¹⁷¹ Hintersteiner, 'Stages of Life' Theories Faced with Globalized Culture,' p.44.

Nicola Slee claims that stage theory is male-biased and does not adequately account for the different ways in which women develop.¹⁷² Sharon Daloz Parks, in her review of critique of Fowler's work, says 'the most substantial analysis and critique challenging the normativity of developmental models in general come from women's research and analysis'.¹⁷³ She cites the pioneering work, *In A Different Voice*, by Carol Gilligan in which Gilligan argues that theories of moral and emotional development such as those propounded by Kohlberg are really based solely on men's experiences.¹⁷⁴ In the 1993 prefatory essay to the reprint, Gilligan says: 'I wrote [the book] to bring women's voices into psychological theory and to reframe the conversation between women and men.'¹⁷⁵ Gilligan's desire to give women a distinctive and recognisably female voice proved hugely influential and others have consolidated it, notably Mary Belenky *et al* in *Women's Ways of Knowing* which posits a difference between separate and connected forms of knowing.¹⁷⁶ Neither Gilligan nor Belenky *et al* refer directly to Fowler's work but make key contributions to the gender debate which continue to reverberate. The possibility of gender bias in faith development is further explored in an interesting exchange between Reich, Schweitzer and DeNicola.¹⁷⁷ In this, Reich makes the point: 'As regards gender-

¹⁷² Slee, Nicola, 'Further on from Fowler,' in *Research in Religious Education*, ed. Leslie J. Francis, W.K. Kay, and W.S. Campbell (Leominster, UK; Macon, Georgia: Gracewing/Smyth and Helwys, 1996).

¹⁷³ Parks, Sharon Daloz, 'The North American Critique of James Fowler's Theory of Faith Development,' in *Stages of Faith and Religious Development: Implications for Church, Education and Society*, ed. James W. Fowler, Karl Ernst Nipkow and Friedrich Schweitzer (London: SCM, 1992), p.113.

¹⁷⁴ Gilligan, Carol, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development*, Second ed. (Cambridge, Mass. and London, England: Harvard, 1993).

¹⁷⁵ Gilligan, *In A Different Voice*, ' p.xxvi.

¹⁷⁶ Belenky, Mary Field, *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind* (New York: Basic Books, 1986).

¹⁷⁷ Reich, K. Helmut, 'Do We Need a Theory for the Religious Development of Women?,' *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 7, no. 2 (1997); Schweitzer, Friedrich, 'Why We Might Still Need a Theory for the Religious Development of Women,' *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 7, no. 2 (1997); DeNicola, Karen, 'Response to Reich's "Do We Need a Theory for the Religious Development of Women?"' *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion* 7, no. 2 (1997).

sensitive research on the religiousness of adults, it may be more fruitful to use feminine and masculine "orientations" as variables rather than being female or male'.¹⁷⁸

Simon Baron-Cohen's book *The Essential Difference* makes points which I find persuasive in terms of considering the role of gender in spirituality. He points out that the differences between men and women's brains have previously been explored in terms of language ability and spatial awareness but that he considers the 'essential difference' to be that of 'empathy' versus 'systemizing'. He is emphatically saying that this is not *all* men or women, but a general trend or pattern. Baron-Cohen defines the female brain as one in which empathizing is more developed than systemizing and uses the terms E, S, and B, for people who seem to have both in equilibrium (balanced brain).¹⁷⁹ He is very clear that 'your sex does not dictate your brain type', just that his evidence indicates that more men than women have the male brain and vice versa.¹⁸⁰ He warns against the dangers of stereotyping, which 'reduces individuals to averages, whereas science recognizes that many people fall outside the average range for their group'.¹⁸¹ Baron-Cohen is persuaded that there are 'essential differences' between women and men and 'the old idea that these might be wholly cultural in origin is nowadays too simplistic.' He delayed writing this in the 1990s because of what he terms the 'political correctness debate' and not wishing to 'perpetuate the historical inequalities women have suffered.' He concludes that, more

¹⁷⁸ Reich, 'Do We Need a Theory for the Religious Development of Women?,' p.67.

¹⁷⁹ Baron-Cohen, *The Essential Difference*, p.6-7.

¹⁸⁰ Baron-Cohen, *The Essential Difference*, p.8. It is worth noting that there is a very significant number of the population who, according to Baron-Cohen's research, have neither the E or S brain but the balanced brain - see p.151, fig.8.

¹⁸¹ Baron-Cohen, *The Essential Difference*, p.9.

importantly than gender stereotypes, 'Individuals are just that: individuals.'¹⁸² I am sympathetic to this view and, for me, what Baron-Cohen terms 'brain gender' is an aspect of one's individuality and an aspect of one's spirituality, alongside other factors like personality and learning style, all of which surely shape our spiritual lives. A deeper understanding of 'the essential difference' can add to a carefully nuanced and subtle exposition of spiritual growth.

Models of maturity from Christian spiritual direction

We now consider models of maturity found in Christian spiritual direction. Watts, Nye and Savage point out a qualitative difference between psychological theories of human development and the Christian understanding of spiritual growth, which may be deliberately sought. They observe that 'a pastoral view of maturity has to take into account both psychology's insights about the more natural and passive qualities of development, and the image of development as something Christians consciously strive for' and suggest that 'maturity may depend on discovering a balanced way of combining passive and active processes of change and growth, in which case, an understanding of maturity has to draw on psychological *and* theological interpretations of development.'¹⁸³ They point out that 'a positive attitude to or desire for change' is a key aspect of religious maturity and it is to those self-conscious practices that we now turn our attention.¹⁸⁴

¹⁸² Baron-Cohen, *The Essential Difference*, see pp.10-12.

¹⁸³ Watts, Nye, and Savage, *Psychology for Christian Ministry*, p.116, italics original.

¹⁸⁴ Watts, Nye, and Savage, *Psychology for Christian Ministry*, p.117.

Elizabeth Liebert's *Changing Life Patterns*

In *Changing Life Patterns*, Elizabeth Liebert relates the work of spiritual direction to stage-change models of human development. She dialogues with Jane Loevinger's theory of ego development and Robert Kegan's idea of the evolving self and drawing on these theories, she presents a view of development which is a type of stage theory.¹⁸⁵ However, she also remarks that human life is messier than stage theories imply: Her experience is that 'the real people who come for spiritual direction never fit neatly into stages' and that we are 'far more complicated than any theory can capture.'¹⁸⁶ Her nuancing of stage theory from personal experience of spiritual direction leads her to assert that 'individuals may use a variety of meaning systems (i.e. from different theoretical stages) in response to a variety of situations.'¹⁸⁷ This leads me to question the overall value of stage theories of human development, but Liebert considers there is still much that is of use within them, and in the main argument of the book, gives a detailed explanation of their use within spiritual direction. This study was not concerned with individual spiritual direction, but with congregational spiritual guidance; however I note some interesting correspondences between her understanding of maturity and my own, which is outlined below.

Although Liebert does not use the word surrender, she suggests that 'spiritual growth facilitates transcending ourselves, not *obliterating* ourselves as we increasingly recognize and join with God in co-creating the world.'¹⁸⁸ Nor is my understanding of surrender to do with obliteration, but is a willed yielding of the self to God. Drawing on the wisdom of feminist theology, Liebert also writes, 'Feminist psychological

¹⁸⁵ Liebert, *Changing Life Patterns: Adult Development in Spiritual Direction*, p.32ff.

¹⁸⁶ Liebert, *Changing Life Patterns: Adult Development in Spiritual Direction*, p.34.

¹⁸⁷ Liebert, *Changing Life Patterns: Adult Development in Spiritual Direction*, p.37.

¹⁸⁸ Liebert, *Changing Life Patterns: Adult Development in Spiritual Direction*, p.14.

theories compel the theological/spiritual tradition to revise unnuanced understandings of such "spiritual" issues as self-denial.' She continues: 'As we come to realize that whole classes of persons have been encouraged to internalize submissiveness as a virtue, ... we must question our traditional understandings of self-abnegation.'¹⁸⁹ Certainly we can question ideas of submission, and self-abnegation is an unhelpful way of construing our surrender to God. Liebert is also critical of humanistic psychology's emphasis on self-actualisation and suggests that the spiritual tradition 'challenges unnuanced self-actualisation theories and calls them to see that the severed relationships between individuals, societies and the world must be reconnected. Autonomy without interdependence is as bankrupt as are the overly dependent relationships appropriately critiqued by humanistic psychology.'¹⁹⁰

Cecilia Goodman's *The Path of Prayer*

A second understanding of spiritual development comes from a practitioner in spiritual direction, Cecilia Goodman CJ. In her work as a member of the community of the Congregation of Jesus, both at St. Bede's Pastoral Centre in York and at other retreat centres, she has evolved an understanding of the path of prayer, as she finds it described by the mystics throughout the Christian spiritual tradition, and as observed by her in her extensive work in the Ignatian tradition, directing religious, clergy and lay Christians in several denominations.¹⁹¹ Her model does not suggest a hierarchy of development from one stage to another, but a much more flexible and perhaps

¹⁸⁹ Liebert, *Changing Life Patterns: Adult Development in Spiritual Direction*, p.19.

¹⁹⁰ Liebert, *Changing Life Patterns: Adult Development in Spiritual Direction*, p.19.

¹⁹¹ Goodman is a respected and sought after spiritual director and retreat leader. She has a large volume of work published locally through St. Bede's Pastoral Centre, much of which is available as talks recorded on CD. Much of her work is on Ignatius' Spiritual Exercises and their reinterpretation and use by spiritual direction practitioners, see for example: Goodman, Cecilia, C.J., "Understated Wisdom: Another Look at the Additional Directions of Week 1 and the *Contemplatio* of *The Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius," (York: Congregation of Jesus/St. Bede's Pastoral Centre, 2008).

unpredictable, spiral inwards towards God, where the possibilities of both losing or choosing to leave 'the path of prayer' are clearly delineated. This diagram appears below and is taken from her booklet, 'The Path of Prayer'.¹⁹²

This 'path' of prayer begins with an awareness of something beyond the self, which moves into a time of joyful appreciation of God's presence and companionship, often characterised by great energy and commitment, often to the local church. People may then move into a place of darkness or dryness, and go through a period of difficulty, a sense of isolation from God, or the absence of God. This causes fluctuations in the emotions, which Goodman characterises as imbalance. At several points on this path, people may move away from faith entirely and it should be noted that there are several points where Goodman thinks that people both recommit and go through periods of confusion before being drawn into a place of such awareness of God's love that there is a sense of union with God. The prayer of union is considered to be a time when a person is held in prayer by God and there is a sense of the suspension of the will whilst the state persists, usually a short time which may feel much longer.

¹⁹² Available from St. Bede's Pastoral Centre, Blossom Street, York and reproduced here by permission.



Figure 4 - Goodman's Path of Prayer

My model

Drawing on all these insights, I propose my own model of spiritual maturity.

Writing as a Christian and a religious practitioner, there are certain assumptions which underpin my thinking on growth towards spiritual maturity: these are: an acknowledgment of the reality or the possibility of the reality, of a creator God who is mysteriously both beyond and yet within forms a fundamental plank for spiritual growth. This relationship, or the potential for relationship, will be acknowledged as dynamic, evolving and potentially transformative.¹⁹³ Interiorly, it may show itself as a discipline of prayer, changing and evolving over time; in a commitment to a formal

¹⁹³ It is worth noting that congregations can be highly resistant to change of any kind, and the impact of the group upon the individual's journey of faith can be significant. Parish priests and congregational leaders need to give consideration to the prevailing ethos of each congregational grouping and ask themselves whether it allows or inhibits the open asking of questions about faith and whether it permits members of the group to grow at their own rate.

‘rule of life’, or to the practice of regular retreats and the receiving of spiritual direction. Exteriorly, it should manifest itself as a commitment to and wish to be involved in God’s love, justice, mercy and righteousness in the world. The person who is developing spiritually towards mature faith will show some or all of these twelve characteristics.¹⁹⁴

- Sense of interdependence

As we are created to be in relationship and to build community, so the life of faith is worked out in community, whether in a church setting, or in the one-to-one of spiritual direction, which is always itself held by a prayerful community. The maturing Christian will be able to acknowledge an interdependence, which is healthy and mutual, held within our dependence on God as creator, redeemer and sanctifier.

- Compassionate loving resulting in loving action

Increasing closeness to Christ marked by an increase in the ability to offer loving compassion to others as individuals, whether friend or stranger and to find pity and compassion for the ills of the world. A maturing faith is marked by compassionate and loving action for others, regardless of their status or desserts.

- Seeing the world through God's eyes - Ignatian 'indifference' and detachment

Spiritually maturing persons might be expected, in Ignatian terms, to reach a place of 'indifference', meaning a type of healthy detachment from the things of the world, which can lead us into freedom to see the world and respond to it as God wants.

¹⁹⁴ This echoes Thorne’s twelve commandments, but moves from the directive to the descriptive.

- Self-knowledge

Growth in self-knowledge is one of the great strengths of Ignatian spirituality. As we become increasingly aware of the 'sharp edges' of our own personality, the less likely we are to unknowingly inflict damage on other people. That growing awareness, initiated by God, is effectively facilitated by the Ignatian conversation of spiritual direction, whereby the spiritually mature can share in assisting the development of others less experienced.

- Practising forgiveness, resolving conflicts, mediating peaceful relationships

The spiritually maturing person, growing in self-awareness, might then reasonably be expected to be more forgiving of others' shortcomings, as they move to a place of understanding and forgiveness of their own. They will become increasingly effective in facing and resolving conflict and become points of stability and peace-making towards whom others will gravitate.

- Reflexivity (ability to reflect on one's own actions)

Self-awareness results in more considered actions and a growth in the ability to consider human interactions and impacts on others as part of a life lived for God. The learning of reflexivity through prayer is a key feature of Ignatius's teachings.

- Self-esteem through awareness of God's undeserved love

Much of the thrust of the Spiritual Exercises is to bring people into an understanding of the depth of God's love for them in Christ. A person who is maturing spiritually might deal with guilt more effectively, knowing that at all times they are loved and valued by God. This brings a growth in appropriate self-esteem, which is unlike

pride, as the realisation of God's undeserved love strikes home as a transformative experience.

- Sense of surrender to God's will

Acknowledging the inestimable love and power of God to transform may bring a sense of the human will being of far less importance than before. Instead, a desire to live for God and to do that which is pleasing to God emerges. At this point the spiritually aware person may realise that surrender to the will of God is the only possible way forward. Living this out in reality remains a constant challenge. It may be learned through waiting, patience, coping with adversity, and spiritual experiences which have been described as 'desert' or 'the dark night of the spirit'.

- Loss of self-importance

With the above comes a concomitant loss of self-importance, or to use a more recognisably Christian phrase, a growth in humility. This is not the false humility of 'hiding one's light under a bushel' which is a mistake many immature Christians make; it is a much more rigorous, detached and realistic estimation of one's own place in the world.

- Ability to cope with complexity, doubt and failure

The mature Christian is able to face doubt and the complexity of moral questions without loss of faith. They will have faced many challenges to their faith already and have a sense of trust and willingness to submit which enables them to persevere in difficult circumstances. There will be a growing realisation that life is not within human control, and that the sense of control is illusory. There will be an increasing

ability to accept failure when it occurs and to respond creatively out of it, in order to build something better.

- Sense of life being integrated (into God's purpose)

Maturing faith in a transforming God will bring an increasing level of integration and harmony. Aspects of the personality and the context in which one lives begin to mesh together, to bear fruit for the benefit of others.

- Finding God in all things

One of Ignatius's emphases is on learning to find God in all things.¹⁹⁵ The maturing Christian will not compartmentalise life but will see every part of it as lived under God and for God. Eventually, all creation seems to speak of God and God's compassionate loving is extended to all creation through individual and corporate human action. There is a sense of coming into freedom through surrender to God and the result of this is learning to see others as the primary focus of our integration, and that our sense of integration and resultant coming to wholeness are derived from submission to God.

This is a dynamic model, involving process and movement rather than stasis. The type of mature faith sketched above is something *towards which* we move – thus the spiritual life is conceived as *trajectory*, or direction, rather than as a goal to be achieved.

¹⁹⁵ This phrase from Ignatius is hugely significant for those writing about Ignatian spirituality, see for example: Hebblethwaite, Margaret, *Finding God in All Things: The Way of St. Ignatius*, 2nd ed. (London: Fount, 1994) and Barry, William A., *Finding God in All Things* (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press, 1991).

Surrender - The distinctiveness of this model

What is distinctive about this model and how does it differ from psychological models of maturity? There are a number of points of correlation with the model of maturity in humanistic psychology, notably these – first, the importance of a sense of self-worth, though theologically this is construed differently; secondly, the ability to cope with and resolve conflict; thirdly, the potential to cope with doubt and complexity and lastly, the value of self-knowledge. These are acknowledged as important for both psychological and spiritual growth.

There is a point of significant contrast, however, between self-actualisation as the pinnacle of maturity, suggested by humanistic psychology and my suggestion that surrender to God might be construed as a defining mark of Christian spiritual maturity.¹⁹⁶ Secular psychology gives a high status to a sense of independence and individuality, which can be contrasted with the Christian emphasis on community and relationality although we should acknowledge that within the Christian churches perhaps there has been too great an individualistic emphasis in the latter half of the twentieth century.

We must be careful to redeem the language of surrender, because of the point already well made by Elizabeth Liebert above. Feminist theology avers that this type of language has been used over centuries to oppress women and prevent them from playing a full role in an androcentric church.¹⁹⁷ Surrender, obedience and

¹⁹⁶ I am well aware that in the eyes of some, perhaps particularly feminist, theologians, language of surrender might seem to need redeeming, and I hope to show how this might be possible.

¹⁹⁷ Numerous works of feminist theology could be cited here, but in brief: Hampson, Daphne, *Swallowing a Fishbone: Feminist Theologians Debate Christianity* (London: SPCK, 1996); LaCugna, Catherine Mowry, ed., *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective* (New York: Harper Collins, 1993); Lerner, Gerda, *The Creation of Patriarchy: Women and History* (New York: OUP, 1986); Ruether, Rosemary Radford, *Sexism and God-Talk* (London: SCM, 1983); Schüssler

submission are powerful words which have been used to justify suffering as a necessity; something simply to be borne as part of the Christian pilgrimage, rather than as something to be struggled against and resisted. Liberation theology can also marshal powerful and persuasive objections to the language of surrender. So what is distinctive about this word that no other can take its place in the model of spiritual maturity I propound?

Starting with intuition and personal experience and working outwards; looking back over my own spiritual journey (and not wishing to claim any type of maturity superior to any other priest involved in day-to-day parish work), I can identify points at which I realised that my own will had to become subordinate to God's.¹⁹⁸ I can trace a pattern of believing myself to be in control of life, through the challenge of difficulties and 'desert' times, to an acceptance of my inability always to 'manage life' as I would wish. Key to these experiences was the recognition, usually with the benefit of hindsight, that it was at the times that I gave up struggling and gave in to God, however we construe that, that life seemed to 'come right' and I moved into something which was qualitatively better for me and those around me, often in most unexpected ways. This is a very personal view, and I note the caution sounded by Batson et al about imposing one's personal experience upon others.¹⁹⁹ However, the commonality of this type of experience was borne out in my sessions of spiritual direction and the wisdom gained in retreats, guided by experienced Ignatian

Fiorenza, Elisabeth, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (London: S.C.M. Press, 1983).

¹⁹⁸ Some might see this as a particularly female way of approaching the subject; others might suggest that this is a feature more of personality than gender. The impact of gender on spiritual growth is considered throughout this study.

¹⁹⁹ See chapter 6, *Dimensions of Individual Religion*, and especially p.157 in Batson, Schoenrade, and Ventis, *Religion and the Individual: A Social-Psychological Perspective*.

directors, as well as observed in others in my parish ministry.²⁰⁰ I wanted to explore whether this pattern held true generally for the people amongst whom I ministered, and this desire to explore was the starting point for this piece of work.

I have found support for this thinking elsewhere. Robert Warren, writing mainly on mission and ecclesiology, has recently described Anglican spirituality as having four ‘coordinates’: being a ‘yielded’, ‘integrated’, ‘community’ and ‘transforming’ spirituality.²⁰¹ He describes secular spirituality as being about ‘getting control’, whereas Christian spirituality is about ‘surrender to God’, or, referencing de Caussade, himself a Jesuit, ‘self-abandonment to divine providence.’²⁰² Not only is his thinking on this similar to mine, that is, that there is a very important way in which we must ‘give in’ to God in order to grow spiritually, he has also chosen the same word, surrender, to describe what he sees as a key characteristic of Christian spirituality.²⁰³ Is this a gendered view of the spiritual life? Might feminist theology say that it is easier for men to speak of surrender, as they do not experience powerlessness in the same way as women? How do women wish to speak of yielding to God?

In a masterful and moving chapter in *Mystical Theology*, Mark McIntosh explores the same idea. Drawing on the work of Marguerite Porete, Edith Stein and Simone Weil to support his description of authentic human selfhood, he describes how Stein's view of human freedom is that 'it can only be consummated by the soul's self-

²⁰⁰ Part of my spiritual practice since being ordained in 1998 has been the keeping of a yearly silent retreat, and every third year to make a longer retreat, three of which have been at St. Beuno's in North Wales, a major Jesuit Retreat Centre which works ecumenically.

²⁰¹ PowerPoint presentation given to Tynemouth Deanery Chapter, 20th October 2010.

²⁰² De Caussade, Jean-Pierre, *The Sacrament of the Present Moment*, trans. Kitty Muggeridge (Glasgow: Fount, 1981).

²⁰³ Unpublished work – discussed in private conversation, 20th October 2010.

surrender to God' and continues, 'placing itself into God's hands allows the soul to fulfil the potential of its freedom - because it then begins to stand in a new relationship with God: no longer does the self-surrendered soul stand on *one* side with God as the ultimate object on the *other*.' He goes on: 'I interpret Stein here to mean here that, standing within the trinitarian self-surrender, the soul participates in that infinite giving of God to God which is both the ultimate kenosis and the eternal constitution of the divine existence.'²⁰⁴ On discussing the 'puzzling insights' of Marguerite Porete, he says that she 'presents the handing back of this will as the proper consummation of the human soul's creaturely existence' and that Porete suggests that 'the ultimate state of the soul's identity is only achieved through union or re-union of the divine and creaturely wills as one will.'²⁰⁵ In words which echo and contradict the language of humanistic psychology, in discussing Weil's thought, he says: 'We cannot really be who we have the potential to be unless we give up trying to be this self-construed, autonomous, object-making subject.'²⁰⁶ This for me is the paradoxical heart of Christian spiritual maturity; that it is only as we give up, surrender, yield ourselves to God that we discover our truest and most authentic selves and begin to be the people we were created to be.

Finally in this chapter, we look at a prominent woman theologian who has put forward the idea of surrender as a key aspect of the Christian spiritual life. Sarah Coakley explores the paradox of power and vulnerability that she finds in theological feminism, agreeing that submission is not a popular concept amongst feminists. Her argument is carefully nuanced and worth looking at in some detail. She locates the

²⁰⁴ McIntosh, Mark A., *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology* (Malden, MA; Oxford; Carlton, Victoria: Blackwell, 1998), p.229.

²⁰⁵ McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology*, pp223-224.

²⁰⁶ McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology*.p.230.

will to power of human autonomy in the Enlightenment and says that postmodernity's 'more nebulous quest for the state of agency' is little different. In these terms, surrender would therefore be seen as being at the cost of freedom, 'a delimitation of options' which is not to be borne.²⁰⁷ This fear of submission or dependency presents a real challenge. She asks a key question: 'How can the call for the liberations of the powerless and oppressed, especially of women, possibly coexist with a revalorization of any form of "submission"?'²⁰⁸ She sees the opposition of 'dependent vulnerability and liberative power' as a false dichotomy and in the essay *Kenosis and Subversion*, she looks at how Christian feminism has suppressed ideas of vulnerability and kenosis. Post-Christian feminism has made female autonomy 'a supreme good which kenotic Christology can only undermine.'²⁰⁹ Coakley wants to suggest that there is a type of kenosis, not only compatible with feminist theology but vital to it, in that it embraces the spiritual paradoxes of 'losing one's life in order to save it'²¹⁰. To fail to confront these ideas of 'fragility, suffering and self-emptying except in terms of victimology' ultimately endangers all feminist theology in that it fails properly to confront the paradoxical power of the cross and resurrection.²¹¹ For Coakley, this embracing of a proper human vulnerability which transcends gender stereotypes can be found by engaging in prayer, and for her especially, wordless, or contemplative prayer. She suggests that we can only be properly empowered if 'we cease to set the agenda, if we "make space" for God to be God.'²¹²

²⁰⁷ Coakley, Sarah, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy, and Gender, Challenges in Contemporary Theology*. (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), Prologue p.xii.

²⁰⁸ Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, p.xv.

²⁰⁹ Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, p.3.

²¹⁰ See Matthew 10:39 and 16:25; Mark 8:35; Luke 9:24.

²¹¹ Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, p.33.

²¹² Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, p.33-4.

Coakley pushes beyond existing gender stereotypes, saying that the 'willed effacement to a gentle omnipotence' that she wants to encourage is not just a challenge to masculinism, but would 'up-end all previous certainties and dogmatisms', including those of the gender debate: 'whilst spiritual kenosis, thus construed, may, in our current climate, be easy for men to avoid altogether, and even easier perhaps, for women seriously to misconstrue (as appropriate sexual submission), we cannot rest whilst such implied "essentialist" visions of gender still exercise us.'²¹³ Coakley argues for a 'creaturely dependence' on God, which she acknowledges has had 'some fatal cultural admixtures for women in Christian patriarchal society,' but she refers to Dorothee Soelle's posing of the question: is the matter of human dependency 'only a repressive inheritance from the past or is it part of the simple fact that we are created?'²¹⁴

Following McIntosh and Coakley's lead, I think we need to resist gender stereotyping and an unquestioning acceptance of 'gender normative' behaviour. Coakley recommends that we distinguish very carefully what we mean by different sorts of dependence and concludes by saying that to 'grope' towards 'a more equitable representation of male and female creatureliness before God is to do a new thing' and she wants to suggest, against much post-Christian feminism, that 'an 'absolute' dependence is indeed at the heart of true human creatureliness and the contemplative quest.'²¹⁵

²¹³ Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, p.37.

²¹⁴ Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, p.55-6.

²¹⁵ Coakley, *Powers and Submissions*, p.67-8.

Summary

In this chapter we have drawn insights from several models of maturity offered by humanistic psychology; the psychology of religion; faith development theory; Ignatian spirituality and spiritual direction. My own model of mature spirituality is laid out in detail. Surrender is proposed and explored as a key area of difference between the psychological models and my model, which will itself be critiqued in the closing chapter, in the light of the findings from the action research phase, to which we now turn.

Chapter 4 – Fieldwork - the Action Research Phase

‘If you are going to pursue ethnography, you may as well put yourself in a relaxed frame of mind; ethnography need not drag on and on, but neither is it something to be done by anyone in a hurry.’²¹⁶

Harry Wolcott

This chapter describes the fieldwork; sets the research within its Anglican context and reflects on the role of the researcher who chooses auto-ethnography: research within one’s own context.

The setting of the research

My context

I am a white woman, married with grown up children. I was baptised in the Church of England and brought up in it until the age of 15. From then until age 27, I did not attend church, and although my belief in God never disappeared, it was in the background for those years. The birth of our first child brought significant change. Belief came to the forefront again, beginning a return to church which gradually wound its way towards ordination. Those early years of renewed church attendance were very formative and although I have experienced other ways of ‘being church’, particularly during ordination training, I think I will always be an Anglican.²¹⁷ My spirituality has been profoundly shaped in the Anglican tradition, though I have greatly benefited from broadening experiences offered by spiritual direction, first from an Anglican religious, and then from a Catholic religious and a Methodist, the latter two both directing within the framework of the Ignatian Spiritual Exercises. I

²¹⁶ Wolcott, Harry F, *Ethnography: A Way of Seeing*, Second ed. (Lanham, New York, Toronto, Plymouth UK: Altamira, 2008), p.8.

²¹⁷ See Warren, Robert, *Being Human, Being Church* (London: Marshall Pickering, 1995).

do not claim to be spiritually fully mature, but think it is something at which human beings can aim.

I have always lived in England in a variety of contexts from cities (Manchester and London) to deepest rural, spending the greater part of my life thus far in small market towns in the north of England. Ordained in 1998 I am mobile rather than rooted in a particular community because ordained stipendiary ministry within the Church of England requires it. I changed Dioceses during this research, which profoundly impacted my analysis; the effects are considered in the following chapter. I am highly educated to post-graduate level but also have a background in retail and prior to ordination was a self-employed business woman, in partnership with my husband. During the field research I served a group of rural Church of England congregations in the central tradition, in the north of England as their parish priest. As the research began, I had been in the parishes for five years. I knew the churches and the communities well and was well-known within them.

As a practising Christian I bring certain assumptions to this work: a belief in the reality of God and the possibility of unmediated spiritual experience of God; in the possibility of spiritual growth; in the validity of my own life as a priest and in the validity of the church as both institution and community.

The context of the research participants

They were white British, 21 female and 7 male, and of various ages from the late 20s to over 90, all worshipping in the Anglican churches I served, although some of them had backgrounds in other denominations - Church of Scotland, Methodist, Baptist and other free churches. They lived in rural and semi-rural settings and some were

commuting to cities to work. Their educational backgrounds were very varied - from those who left school at 14 to those educated to PhD level. The group was broadly middle-class, despite the disparity in educational background, but their work settings and life experiences were hugely varied - the group included farmers, a retired solicitor, four nurses (two working, two retired), full time mothers, teachers, a sales representative, an HR specialist, farmers' wives, a former diplomat, a university lecturer, a nursery nurse, a scientist, a carer, a kennel keeper, a hairdresser, a clerical officer. Four of the participants did not stay with the project, three of the most elderly had health problems which prevented them continuing, and one began ordination training, leaving the church on a placement. Of the remaining 24, 18 were women and 6 were men, the ratio being slightly greater in favour of women than the gender balance in the congregations.

The Action Research

Practical matters - limits and constraints on the research:

Other qualitative research in the UK, particularly Ellen Clark-King's *Theology By Heart* and Nicola Slee's *Women's Faith Development*, confirmed that my sample size was reasonable.²¹⁸ My 24 participants generated over 40 hours of recorded interviews and it is important to decide whether you can handle this amount of material yourself. It is worth noting that time spent transcribing is good for mulling over the material and considering someone's discourse in depth. Pat Bazeley emphasizes the importance of building knowledge of your own data - 'what Frost and

²¹⁸ Clark-King, Ellen, *Theology by Heart: Women, the Church and God* (Peterborough: Epworth Press, 2004). Slee, *Women's Faith Development: Patterns and Processes*. Some qualitative work is done with very small samples: Crain and Seymour's paper *The Ethnographer as Minister* has 9 participants.

Stablein referred to as "handling your own rat".²¹⁹ She points out how much of nuance, tone of voice and emotion is lost in transcription; transcribing some or all of the interviews yourself means that this information need not all be lost.

The sample size is defined by the context. If you are working in small rural congregations it is difficult to access large samples or groups of people. This was less of an issue for me because exploration into spiritual growth lent itself to the qualitative research techniques of interviews and a lengthy research period. The completion rate was excellent, with 24 people completing all phases of the prayer course and sermon series. Levels of commitment to the ten sessions of the prayer course were good, varying from the assiduous to the sporadic. All 24 participants who stayed with the research project were interviewed twice, at the beginning and the end of the research period.

Launching the project

The research was launched by advertising in the church news sheet; by sending letters to the congregations and by targeting individuals whom I knew had something to say about their spiritual life, and whom I considered were at different stages of spiritual development. I included some who had come fairly recently to faith and also some whom I knew would not put themselves forward to be involved in such a project. The research was restricted to church-goers to give a coherence to the group and to enable specific reflection on how churchgoing influenced spiritual growth. There were enough volunteers to make the project viable and I refrained from putting any moral pressure, as 'the Vicar,' on people to be involved, in an attempt to address the unequal power relationship between myself and the

²¹⁹ Bazeley, *Qualitative Data Analysis with Nvivo*, p.44.

parishioners and not to abuse my position within the congregations. Kleinman and Copp in their book on fieldwork observe: ‘Some of us believe we cannot get close to participants unless we are their equals or subordinates. ... We do not want participants to see us as better than they are; as more competent, successful, or smarter,’ but they also acknowledge that sometimes a ‘higher-status role’ can work to a researcher’s advantage.²²⁰ That was probably true in my case, as a priest and someone in a position of responsibility locally; I was someone in whom they could confide, and who also might recognise the validity and reality of other people’s spiritual experience. Clear information was given to all members of the congregations during this stage, to ensure that all who wished to be involved could do so, and in keeping with Anglican structures, the PCCs were kept informed throughout.²²¹

Some were concerned about confidentiality, mainly those who had opted for the sermon series, who may not have wanted to share in a group in the first place. They were reassured that they would not be identified in the final writing-up. Others were very open and said that being anonymous in the final research did not matter. In order to protect all the participants, pseudonyms have been used throughout. Two people, one man and one woman, wanted to take part in the prayer group but forewarned me they did not wish to say anything at all. They were concerned about

²²⁰ Kleinman, Sherryl and Martha A. Copp, *Emotions and Fieldwork* (Los Angeles, London, New Delhi: Sage, 1993), p.29.

²²¹ The Parochial Church Council is the local unit of church governance and the decision-making body of the congregation.

how this would appear to the others, but I reassured them that their presence was welcome and that others may not notice their lack of contributions to discussions.²²²

Pilot interviews

In June 2007, some time before the course began, I ‘road-tested’ a list of questions with two participants (1 male, 1 female) whom I knew would give honest feedback.²²³ Transcribing these interviews, I began to realise the size of the task and learned a great deal, much about what *not* to do. To illustrate; one of them talked about God as a rainbow and listening back to the recording, it would have been useful to have drawn her out further on this image. Similarly, even though I had had significant training in listening skills, I had to be careful about responding in my role as a priest and this is something I deal with in more detail below, under ‘Role Confusion.’²²⁴ Concurrently, I gathered names of those who wanted to take part in the *Exploring Prayer* Course and the sermon series. The prayer course began in October 2007; the sermon series began later, in February 2008 and both ran until the end of March 2008. There were 15 participants in *Exploring Prayer* and 10 in the sermon series.²²⁵

The interview questions were chosen to allow people to tell their own story of faith and spiritual growth and to provide marker points for comparison with the second interview. They were revised after the pilots to include additional supplementary questions. The questions were both comparative and narrative: comparison questions

²²² In fact, the most voluble member of the prayer groups did register the lack of spoken contributions by the silent male participant, and challenged him on it in the last session; a situation I had to defuse.

²²³ The pilot questions can be found in Appendix Five.

²²⁴ Acorn Trust ‘Called to Listen’ training in active listening skills; I have tutored others in listening skills for York Diocese.

²²⁵ One participant completed the prayer course but did not do the second interview, having gone on a placement, and so her record was excluded from the final figures.

gave marker points to look for change and narrative questions let people tell their stories, to generate a rich and detailed picture of their prayer life and spiritual journey. The questions covered concepts of prayer; operative images of God; meaning-making; coping with complexity and doubt; obedience to God; compassion and social justice; self-knowledge; sense of freedom, dependence on God and concepts of community. I hoped to uncover what value judgments people were making in these areas and whether they changed in response to the input. A closing pastoral question offered time to talk about any issues raised with me as a priest rather than as a researcher.

Interviewing

Ethnographic study requires the continuous recording of information. Computer technology is rapidly changing the mechanics of this, but at the time of my research, I did not consider voice recognition software reliable enough for my purposes. I used a digital voice recorder (DVR) both to record interviews and upload files to the computer. This meant that manual transcription was needed for an accurate verbatim record.²²⁶ DVRs have a limited memory capacity and need uploading regularly; voice files need regular backup to a less corruptible storage method and transcriptions should be printed. A decision whether to use a computer assisted data analysis package should be made early on in the process and before investing in

²²⁶ There are several good books on qualitative research techniques with advice on how to do this well: Richards, *Handling Qualitative Data: A Practical Guide*; Bazeley, *Qualitative Data Analysis with Nvivo*; Warner, R. Stephen, *New Wine in Old Wineskins: Evangelicals and Liberals in a Small-Town Church* (Berkeley ; London: University of California Press, 1988). An alternative style of transcription can be found in: Slee, *Women's Faith Development: Patterns and Processes*.

expensive software, decide whether you want the challenge of learning to use it effectively.²²⁷

Recording the interview

Researchers in the hard sciences tell us that the mere fact of observing a phenomenon changes it in some way. This is immediately noticeable in the interview. The presence of a recorder of any type alters the personal encounter, for both participants. For me there was a feeling of awkwardness, which undoubtedly conveyed itself in early interviews, and I sensed an inhibiting effect on the interviewee. I would now recommend more than two pilot interviews, not for transcription but for experience. I was more relaxed during the pilots, as I and the interviewee were both clear that we were 'just practising'. As I entered into the interviewing phase, I became aware of a sense of dislocation about my role, which was considerable and more than I had anticipated.²²⁸ Researchers should allow for reactions that participants might have to being recorded and perhaps this is an area where auto-ethnographers have an advantage, as they will have a better idea of how their participants behave generally and be able to make an estimation of the impact. Without exception, participants did react to being recorded, varying from seeming pleased, to being nervous and reluctant. With one anxious participant, I offered not to use the recorder; at this she relented and agreed, saying that her words might benefit somebody else. I was concerned that people would censor themselves and limit what they were prepared to say, despite the assurances of confidentiality and also that people's expectations of me as their priest would colour their responses, or that they would want to impress me in some way. Two people in the prayer groups said that they wanted 'to support

²²⁷ For my amount of data, NVivo was invaluable. I would have struggled to manage the data on paper and NVivo helped me to see patterns I may have missed if I had been coding manually.

²²⁸ This is explored more fully in the section on 'Role confusion' below.

me' in my research. In return, I said that I hoped they would themselves gain something valuable from the prayer groups, although it should be remembered that all research is to some extent exploitative.

Maintaining self-criticality

It is important to maintain self-criticality in this type of research and reflexivity is the key to maintaining relationships during and after research and also to an effective analysis phase.²²⁹ The interview process led me to question my ministry in those parishes - what was the nature of my relationship with these people? Becoming a researcher was a new experience, and I was reluctant to view people as 'subjects' in a research study, however I believe that the depth of my pastoral knowledge of them, in many cases considerable, enhanced the work and added depth to the data. On many occasions the interviewee alluded to some significant issue in their lives and knew that I understood, not needing to explain difficulties of which I was already aware. This pastoral 'shorthand', sometimes as little as a significant look, or a pause, helped them to move more easily into talking about the spiritual significance of their experiences. It is sensible to check these allusions occasionally and a brief interjection can give that assurance. This is a real advantage for the auto-ethnographer: painful situations are referred to more freely and cannot be glossed over as they might be with an 'outsider'. Some might say that people may talk more easily to a relative stranger, but on the whole I was humbled and amazed by the level of trust placed in me and participants' willingness to reveal a great deal about themselves. Crain and Seymour record a similar experience, in their case when interviewing clergy: 'These folks were so hungry for somebody to listen to them and

²²⁹ See Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, p.62 ff and Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography*, especially Chapters 4 and 5.

to care that I was actually quite amazed by some of what they were willing to share'.²³⁰ This hunger is something I found in the parish setting and again, is something to be respected and not exploited.

Beginning the interview

Careful consideration needs to be given to the setting of the interview as there is a huge significance in whether people feel they are on 'home territory' or not. This is a power issue; I always offered to go to people's homes in an attempt to even the power relationship.²³¹ Most of them accepted this offer but a few participants wanted to meet elsewhere; three came to me and three met me in church after services or events, claiming busy work schedules. People need to be given permission to say anything, in complete confidence. This means monitoring and controlling your own reactions when something unexpected or shocking is said. Every parish priest has had occasions when people say they are not sure they believe Jesus was the son of God and makes a pastoral judgement before responding in that context, whereas the researcher merely records what is said, and notes for future reference their own interior reaction. The minister as auto-ethnographer struggles at this point, as parishioners may seek a response, guidance, or information and be confused by non-responsiveness. As a researcher, your reactions, or lack of them, will be noted, and some interviewees flounder, searching for affirmation which is not forthcoming. There were times in the research when I sensed participants wanting pastoral care, or spiritual conversation, which I withheld. As a priest, this was painful and on occasion, listening back to recordings much later, I cried about moments that felt like failing to care. The discussion of emotions in research is not a

²³⁰ Crain and Seymour, 'The Ethnographer as Minister: Ethnographic Research in Ministry,' p.300.

²³¹ Consider how you feel when visiting the doctor, or the hospital.

primary purpose of this thesis, but in the interests of reflexivity, their presence should be noted. Kleinman and Copp state that 'By censoring their notes, fieldworkers may believe that they can prevent their views from contaminating the research. ... We cannot achieve immersion without bringing our subjectivity into play.'²³² They also assert the importance of acknowledging feelings in research, both the positive and the negative.²³³ In their view, in the social sciences, researchers still 'privilege the cognitive and the behavioural over the emotional':

We assume that field researchers' selves and emotions are always implicated in research. We cut ourselves off from our research at a great cost to our work. ... We should discard the question, "Did this researcher's feelings affect the study?" when we read fieldwork accounts and instead ask, "How did the researcher's emotions play a part in the data collection and analysis of this group or setting?"²³⁴

The negotiation of the researcher's own emotions is an important aspect of reflexivity, which is considered in more detail below.

All the interviews except one were with individuals; a married couple took part in the sermon series, and although I suggested individual interviews, they preferred to be interviewed together. This proved awkward and in the second interview, they managed to steer the conversation onto a particular concern of their own, away from my questions. I quickly registered that I would not be able to regain control of the process and simply began to converse with them. One of them realised what was happening and tried to return to my agenda, but the pastoral need of the other overrode us both. If I were repeating the research, I would require separate

²³² Kleinman, *Emotions and Fieldwork*, p.19.

²³³ Kleinman, *Emotions and Fieldwork*, pp.32-37.

²³⁴ Kleinman, *Emotions and Fieldwork*, p.52-3.

interviews. It should also be noted that not all interview material will prove usable and to allow for that at the planning stage.

During the interview

Stress and anxiety in the researcher about the research itself are also factors. Will this interview be useable? Will I frame the right supplementary questions? I noticed on listening back that I tended to ramble when giving explanations at the beginning and tried hard to be more succinct. Researchers should keep such concerns to the back of the mind and be completely engaged with what the person says. Knowing that the interview is being recorded is no substitute for giving someone your full and undivided attention. Anything less and people are immediately aware that your mind is elsewhere. Ten years' experience of listening to the bereaved and the distressed was of invaluable help to me. An accurate aural memory is wonderful but not everyone has this: the DVR means that you can give the speaker your full attention without anxiety. Any lessening of your ability to pay attention will be noticed by the speaker. As Julie Lunn perceptively observes, 'Attention that is focused, undivided, actively engaged, theologically perceptive and offered with warmth and empathy is rare and demanding. Yet, of all the gifts required in Christian ministry, this one is fundamental.'²³⁵ It is good to remember that you have a finite ability to offer this type of focussed engagement and after an hour, it will be difficult to maintain. If an interview seems to need much more than an hour, a supplementary session can be offered. Almost without exception, people spoke for longer in the second interview, the longest being two and a quarter hours. The participant showed no sign of flagging, but I had to explain that I could no longer concentrate properly and so

²³⁵ Lunn, Julie, 'Paying Attention: The Task of Attending in Spiritual Direction and Practical Theology,' *Practical Theology* 2, no. 2 (2009), p.219.

brought the interview to a close. Interviewing skills develop quickly in real situations; another reason for planning plenty of pilot interviews

Asking the questions

Researchers generally avoid asking closed questions, eliciting a simple yes or no, unless there is an immediate open follow-up question. Priest-researchers should be aware of empathetic or disapproving responses which may unconsciously steer the participant.²³⁶ If a question does not precipitate a response, supplementary questions can be judiciously used, however, be willing to sit with silence for longer than you are comfortable. People may need to think, prepare a response or deal with emotion and the interviewer needs to allow sufficient space for this. Allowing silence often precipitates the most interesting responses. Equally you may have to tease out further an interesting response which requires flexibility within your range of questions. Good listening skills mean storing up comments in the short term memory and returning to them when there is suitable break in the interviewee's flow. You need to decide whether to pursue every question on your list, or whether a sufficient answer has already been given in a previous response. Semi-structured interviewing means that questions need not be treated as a straightjacket as long as you cover the ground you intend to probe.

Concluding the interview

I always thanked the person for their time and willingness to be open and reassured them that if there was anything the interview has stirred up which they would like to discuss with me further, as their priest, that I would make myself available, separate

²³⁶ Particular attention should be paid to non-verbal signals like body language and facial expression.

from the research concerns. Only three people availed themselves of that offer and made another time to come and see me, but on listening back to the recordings much later, I think I discerned other occasions where people were searching for a response from me as their priest. There may also be a gender issue here for women priests, if Simon Baron-Cohen is right when he says ‘The female brain is predominantly hard-wired for empathy’ which may make women in ministry both more sensitive and vulnerable to the emotions of others.²³⁷ Doctors tell us that often the most significant thing in a consultation is said when the patient’s hand is on the doorknob. This is also true in interviewing. Researchers need to be careful about when to turn off the recorder, and be ready to make mental notes, as people may suddenly feel free to say something they have been withholding.

Action research 1 – ‘Exploring Prayer’

The prayer course took place in the church which was used because there were to be times of silent prayer, and the church seemed an appropriate context. The smaller group met on Friday mornings and the larger group met on Tuesday evenings as some were limited by their work commitments. The format for both groups was the same: a welcome; brief time for chat; some input from me, with a small handout for each week; some time for silent prayer before reconvening to talk about their experience, closing with a cup of tea and time to talk informally.²³⁸ The ten sessions were:

One: Simple prayer and centring prayer

²³⁷ Baron-Cohen, *The Essential Difference*, p.1.

²³⁸ The course material handout sheets are included in Appendix Eight.

Two: Using the bible in prayer – Lectio Divina and Ignatian meditation

Three: How does God answer our prayer?

Four: Using icons in prayer

Five: Reflecting on the day – the Ignatian Examen

Six: Praying with the newspapers

Seven: Personality and prayer

Eight: Making good decisions/ a timeline of our lives (Ignatian)

Nine: Discernment and distractions (Ignatian)

Ten: Moving into freedom (Ignatian) and Review of the course

The group discussions were sometimes recorded, though this did seem to inhibit openness and I moved later to note-taking. With hindsight, I think I should have persevered with the recordings as some of the group discussions were fascinating and might have assisted mapping the group's development, which proved to be a more significant factor than anticipated.

During the silences, which caused some initial apprehension, they were encouraged to move around the church and find a private place. The church building we used was quite small, but several items were placed around the church to provide a focus for those who wanted something visual to pray with: crosses, pictures and icons. Everyone had the chance to use a candle, which many of them chose to do. There were pew bibles available and also crayons, paints and paper although the drawing materials were not often used. Participants were asked to keep a journal of their thoughts and prayer experiences, and encouraged to use it during the prayer times. I made it clear that this was a personal document, not something I would want to see.

I hoped for two things from this; that their own prayer would be enriched by the encouragement to reflect on it and write about it, as this is good Ignatian practice, and also that they would have something to refer to at second interview stage. Several of them did refer to notes they had made and it had clearly been an important tool for deepening prayer for them.

Here is an extract from my log of this time:

At the beginning of the course, participants are asked to keep a journal - a private log of their thoughts, feelings, responses to the sessions of prayer. It is clear that this is just for them, and that I will only ask them to refer to it before the second interview, but not ask to see it at any time. The aim is that this will mean they will have a place where they can be completely open and honest with themselves. Of course, not everyone learns in the same way, but I encourage them also to draw things or record things in different ways that suit them, so that those who have a more visual or kinaesthetic style of learning might also be able to keep a record of their time on the course.

There are ten sessions, spread over 20 weeks, to give some reasonable length of time for reflection and possible growth to be noticed, both by me but more importantly by the participants themselves. Each session is an hour long, with tea and coffee served at the end and a chance for people to chat if they want to stay. The session begins with some input from me, and they have an A5 sheet of notes which I give them to follow. There is a chance for questions, clarifications, on one session there is a group activity, but the emphasis is on preparing for a time of prayer on their own, guided by the notes and the input I have offered. We start with 5 minutes, and build up to 20 minutes of private time in the last 4 weeks of the course. This is because some people find periods of silent reflection hard to manage if they have not experienced them before. People disperse about the church, to various prayer stations marked by a candle, if they wish to have this focus. Icons and other artefacts are available for those who want them. A small bell is rung to signal the end of the quiet time and it is a gentle signal to return to the group. The option to leave at this point is given, but on almost every occasion, people prefer to stay.

I ask them if they are prepared to talk about the process, but not about the content of their prayer - if they feel able and if they are willing to share. As the group progresses they grow in confidence and begin to trust each other. I observe some new friendships forming, as not everyone knows everyone else, and some deeper ones are forged. Many of the people who come are not people 'at the heart of the church' and I wonder why that should be? During their silent prayer, I prepare refreshments (very quietly!) and once tea and coffee are served, the group chats and the recorder is usually turned off. On one occasion, I regretted this but these things happen.

The groups built trust in each other as the weeks progressed, and began to show concern over absentees, and in the final session which included a review, a sense of the value of working both ‘alone and together’ was expressed. The group which met in the mornings was disappointed when the meetings came to an end and opted to continue meeting on a fortnightly basis as a prayer group. I supported this group for a few weeks, and then delegated the leadership of it to another member.

During the course I was aware of a lessening of the sense of role-dislocation, being more recognisably in priestly role as a spiritual guide and co-learner. I have led a number of parish courses and have always stressed that no-one is an expert but that we learn from each other and from God. Exploring Prayer ran with these ‘basic assumptions’:

- that the desire to pray is prayer itself
- that we respect the confidentiality of this group
- that this is a shared journey
- that we will speak and listen without judging or giving advice

The material written for the course encourages people to try different ways of praying, challenges ingrained habits of prayer and attempts to provoke change and development. In this capacity I was priest first and researcher second, as this type of course is something a parish might reasonably expect their priest to run. At the beginning of the course there was anxiety as to whether anything useful for the research would emerge, though I did not doubt that people would benefit from the time and the material if they engaged with it.

In the groups, participants quickly forgot about being recorded; there was less of a sense of 'being on show' than in the interviews, as people knew that the pressure to speak did not rest solely on them. There were those who by virtue of personality or training were happy to speak in a group setting. It was noticeable that one of the people who had warned me that they did not feel able to speak felt comfortable enough to offer a comment in session 6, and by session 9 was able to say something personal in a group of three people. Chapter 5 reflects further on the value of the group setting, people's expectations of it and the impact of praying alone but alongside others.

Action research 2 - Sermon series

This was a very different type of input, but with the same driver: the offering of spiritual guidance on prayer and the encouragement to reflect on one's own prayer life with the objective of nurturing change. The sermons were longer than my usual preaching, and more structured, as I used prepared text, which was given to participants beforehand. In keeping with my usual style, I did adlib once or twice and with hindsight, I should have recorded the sermons. One of the respondents told me that the best part of my third sermon were some thoughts which were not in the text I had provided! The four sermons covered some of the same ground as the prayer course, but of necessity in a very different way. The titles of the sermons were:

- 'Lord, teach us to pray'
- Jesus opens the scriptures
- Prayer and change

- Living lives of prayer²³⁹

The sermon series was a personal challenge as it clarified for me how much I had become a preacher who used bullet points rather than a full text. A written text now seemed difficult and constraining. The length of the sermons provoked a variety of reactions. Three participants who between them had a very varied experience of church in traditions from Anglo-Catholic to Evangelical said they much preferred a ‘weightier’ sermon and encouraged me to preach at length more frequently, however, someone on the prayer course hated the longer sermons and went on to mention this in PCC, assuming that everyone else agreed. The experience forcibly reminded me how difficult it is to meet everyone’s needs for teaching in one main service in a rural community, where people want to get together when they come to church. The opportunities for churches to serve a ‘niche clientele’ are much greater in the urban environment in the UK.

At the time I considered that doing the sermon series was in some way a second best to the prayer course. I had provided a sermon series to include those who felt a group setting was not what they wanted, and would rather respond individually to me and not be required to participate in discussion. It also enabled four people to take part in the research who I knew would have interesting things to say but who could not or would not commit to the prayer course. On reflection however, it has greatly added to the depth of the research and enabled me to draw interesting comparisons between the two groups.

²³⁹ The texts of the sermons are attached in Appendix Six.

Interviewing – phase 2

I designated the interviews A and B in NVivo. The second, or B, interviews took place over a shorter time frame, during February and March of 2008, as I was offered another post which I decided to accept and I was concerned that people would be unwilling to complete the interview process if they knew of my intention to leave the parish. Twenty eight interviews had given me a great deal of experience; I had a clear idea of what to expect and how to manage the time and I made sure that the time allotted to each person was open-ended, as I knew that some would speak at great length. The second interview generated a lot of questions about bible study possibilities which I encouraged them to explore, knowing that I would not be able to offer ongoing leadership there. One of the sermon series group, who was the youngest participant in the project, had a lot of experience of bible study groups in previous parishes and decided to start a group, which I encouraged. This may or may not have been as a result of the course, but it was brought up at the end of his second interview. My leaving the Diocese brought a finality to this phase of my work which had not been anticipated, but there were advantages which I have described earlier and unusually, I have both been an ‘insider’ and an ‘outsider’ in this research.

Reflections on the researcher experience

In his often-cited 1988 book, *Tales From The Field*, John Van Maanen describes different styles of ethnographic writing.²⁴⁰ In the chapter ‘Realist Tales’, the authorial voice is described as well in the background and in ‘Confessional Tales’, the narrator's voice is to the forefront, the ethnography being focussed on the

²⁴⁰ Van Maanen, John, *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1988).

authorial experience more than the research. There are many ways of writing ethnography, auto-ethnography, researching and writing in one's own context, is only one way, which has recently become more accepted in the social sciences.²⁴¹ I tread a middle ground between Van Maanen's two poles, being I hope both sufficiently visible that readers can decide whether my work is helpful in their own contexts, but not wishing that auto-ethnographic reflections should overshadow my participants' stories. It is worth noting that the very process of reflection and writing up of research experience tends to impose a structure which is not present in the experience itself, which is messier than it appears.

One of the advantages of auto-ethnography is simply that one is already there. The difficult hurdle of gaining access to the people you wish to research is already surmounted, but there are other challenges. Being the 'insider', especially one in a position of power and responsibility makes asking some questions difficult; you cannot ask 'innocent' questions as a newcomer might. Ongoing pastoral relationships need to be maintained, and researching in your own parish is bound to affect relationships. Some parishioners may feel favoured; others overlooked, if they do not wish to take part. Research has the potential to divide a community, especially if cliques form around the researcher. This needs careful handling as some churches have a tendency to factionalism and a qualitative research project

²⁴¹ See, for example, Warner, *New Wine in Old Wineskins: Evangelicals and Liberals in a Small-Town Church*. Warner gives a detailed and honest account of his time in the field (chapter 3) with practical advice on managing records and note taking (p.70) and makes very useful observations on the 'self as instrument' (p.73ff). For a view from a UK context, see: Hobbs, Dick and Tim May, *Interpreting the Field: Accounts of Ethnography* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993). This gives accounts of various methodologies and the chapter by Dick Hobbs; 'Peers, Careers, and Academic Fears: Writing as Field-Work' is very open and self-critical about the process of change undergone by the researcher, (pp.45-66). Also recommended is Spickard, Landres, and McGuire, eds., *Personal Knowledge and Beyond: Reshaping the Ethnography of Religion*.

which includes some and not others could exacerbate this. These possibilities should be thought through at the planning stage.

The participants are stakeholders in your research and may take a positive or negative view of your plans. Research may be limited to the people with whom you work and in my case there was also the question of gaining the support of those amongst whom I worked. Several initial questions presented themselves. Will the Diocese be supportive, or sufficiently interested in the fruits of research to permit the research? Will parishioners see any benefits for themselves that will encourage them to take part in the research? Will the 'gatekeepers' of the community allow the work to begin as planned? Are the proposals sufficiently well thought out that you can answer participants' questions? It is easier to see these matters of concern in hindsight than anticipate them.

The personal cost of being priest and researcher

The process was not without its hitches. The still inchoate nature of my proposal at the end of the first year of doctoral studies meant that it was difficult for me to explain well the parameters of the research work. The PCCs (the individual churches' governing bodies) were therefore unsure as to the amount of time the research would take, which they saw as detracting from the time I would give to them. It proved difficult to allay these fears, as the biggest PCC were unwilling to discuss their worries openly, but a sense of unease was evident over this period, until I was able to clarify my intentions the following year and show them in greater detail how they could be involved. Both stakeholders, the Diocese and the parishes, needed reassurance that they still 'had their money's worth' of effort from me as the

parish priest. I make this point here as I think it is symptomatic of a general undervaluing of congregational spirituality within the Church of England at this time, and will return to this in the concluding chapter. The personal costs of auto-ethnography will differ from researcher to researcher and cannot necessarily be anticipated, but care should be taken to attempt to envisage all the implications of a research project.

Role confusion 1

- on my part

Auto-ethnographers need to be explicit about any confusion of roles. I explained that interviews would not be like usual pastoral or conversational interchanges but that I wanted to hear participants' thoughts and ideas, unaffected by my input. When someone then looks for encouragement or assurance, inviting you to share ideas of your own, or seeking validation for something that they think may be unusual or outlandish, as a researcher, you have to decide whether to respond, whereas in your priestly role you might well empathise. I did not wear the clerical collar for interviews, though the congregations were already used to seeing me without it. I used the well-recognised metaphor of hats - saying that when I had my researcher 'hat' on they might think I was unusually silent or non-responsive, and not to be surprised. My background of listening skills training enabled me to use techniques of non-judgmental and non-interventionist listening as part of the interview process.

I underestimated the level of stress that role confusion would cause. There is a profound challenge to one's self-image as a priest when required to step outside it and become a researcher. For me this took the shape of an initial difficulty in

disengaging from the pastoral concern you have for people as their minister. I tended at first to ask 'empathetic' questions, rather than disinterested ones, especially when material came up which clearly had emotional charge for the interviewee, or when they were referencing things of which I was already aware. I have already alluded to moments in interviews when someone looked for affirmation or an interaction of some kind, which as a researcher I did not offer. Charlotte Aull Davies sums this reflexive interplay up neatly when she says that there is 'an ongoing evaluation and *restructuring of self* in the light of interaction with others and reflection upon that interaction.'²⁴² However, I hope that the level of trust already established with many of the interviewees helped them both to open up and to feel secure that their interview would be confidential. As indicated in Chapter 2, as the research continued, the more I became aware of ways in which people could be exploited and I became concerned not to cause harm. Magolda and Weems have broached this problem:

Qualitative researchers may consider some of the potential for harm at the outset of the fieldwork but most are likely unaware of the complicated situations and dilemmas to negotiate until they arise during the inquiry process. Even the most responsible researcher cannot possibly anticipate what might happen until he or she is in the thick of dealing with actual people and actual situations.²⁴³

This concern was exacerbated by my leaving the parishes shortly after the completion of the active research phase. I thought they would feel I had let them down in some way. I had underestimated the bond that formed through this piece of work, and I went through a period grieving for the lost relationships. This surely happens for every parish priest, but it was intensified by continuing with the research, and literally hearing the voices of those I had left behind, whilst doing the

²⁴² Davies, *Reflexive Ethnography*, p.81, italics mine.

²⁴³ Magolda, 'Doing Harm: An Unintended Consequence of Qualitative Inquiry?', p.496.

transcription. It became clear to me that those emotions were reciprocated when I went back in June 2010 to present some interim findings.

Role confusion 2

- on the participants' part

It became clear early on that it would be necessary to state very clearly the difference in my response to them as researcher, and to explain that rather than the usual interplay and mutual exchange of conversation, or perhaps the spiritual guidance offered in some situations, I would be interested solely in what they had to say, and their thoughts and opinions. It was clear that initially my lack of response unnerved some of them, and there were times when they were clearly looking to me for guidance or input. In transcription, I wrestled with the question of whether or not I should have responded pastorally on occasion and have come to no firm conclusion, other than that there will be some pain involved for the priest-researcher who denies their priestly role in some way, but that the research itself may benefit from such a denial. It is a tightrope to be walked in every context and how to manage it is open to the researcher's discernment.

Reflexivity

I have already alluded to the need to maintain a reflexive stance during research, and now turn to examine this point in greater detail. Spickard, Landres and McGuire suggest that ethnography can be critiqued on four fronts: 'The problem of subjectivity; the insider/outsider problem; the question of researcher identity and

issues of power.²⁴⁴ We might say that undertaking auto-ethnography compounds all these areas of difficulty. They certainly need careful negotiation. It is vitally important in any piece of research to be aware of how the person you are impacts what you do and how you also may be changed by the work you undertake. Reflexivity is thus a cornerstone of the whole process of qualitative research. John Swinton and Harriet Mowat take the view that ‘reflexivity is not a tool of qualitative research, but an integral part of what it actually *is*.’ They continue: ‘reflexivity is the process of critical self-reflection carried out by the researcher ... that enables her (sic) to monitor and respond to her contribution to the proceedings.’²⁴⁵ Being transparent about motives and habitual preoccupations should be always at the forefront of the researcher’s mind. Writing in the Canadian context, Meneley and Young comment that,

Auto-ethnography is challenging because it requires those who are already embedded in particular cultural and social processes to subject themselves and their most intimate surroundings to the same form of critical analysis as they would any other.²⁴⁶

They make another very telling point: ‘What is certain is that the practice of doing ethnography at home invites reflexivity, as it becomes obvious that what separates us from those we study is not some essential and impermeable identity, but, rather, our intellectual preoccupations.’²⁴⁷ They invite us to acknowledge fully our place within the world we study and the impossibility of escaping subjectivity. The best we can do is to make sure that we are as conscious as possible of how far we ourselves intrude into our work. This does not invalidate auto-ethnographical approaches, but

²⁴⁴ Spickard, Landres, and McGuire, eds., *Personal Knowledge and Beyond : Reshaping the Ethnography of Religion*, see p.5 of their introduction to this book of essays.

²⁴⁵ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, p. 58.

²⁴⁶ Meneley, Anna and Donna J. Young, *Auto-Ethnographies: The Anthropology of Academic Practices* (Ontario: Broadview, 2005), pp.2-3.

²⁴⁷ Meneley, *Auto-Ethnographies: The Anthropology of Academic Practices*, p.7.

it does mean that reflexivity is essential if research is to benefit others. When readers can see the full extent of the researcher's role and understand her convictions and assumptions, then they can judge the validity of the research in their own context. Reflexivity is not merely about researcher integrity, honesty and transparency, it also impacts directly upon ministerial outcomes.

Thinking further along those lines, Paul Walker poses a challenging question for clergy: 'whether commitment to change, salvation, or liberation itself causes bias?' He continues, 'Because of the inherent commitment to change in the Christian faith, do clergy therefore tend to see a context not as a "given" to be analysed, but as a contingent situation to be used or developed?'²⁴⁸ I was clear in my own mind of my hope that *Exploring Prayer* and the sermon series would be transformational for the participants, and the results are amply illustrated in the next chapter. On the issue of being either an insider or an outsider, Walker concludes that:

The consensus now is that the crude insider/outsider division is not helpful, because we are all and always both insiders and outsiders in varying degrees, in different contexts. Indeed our insider/outsider status fluxes and changes from one time to another in the same situation and the real question is how we make the best of our status in each situation.²⁴⁹

Stipendiary Anglican clergy occupy this unclear territory more than most, as few have a fixed term contract, but are more likely to change jobs through a process of negotiation at unpredictable intervals. Alongside concrete issues like living in 'tied accommodation', these uncertainties contribute to the feeling of liminality which

²⁴⁸ Walker, Paul, 'Perspectives from Ethnography: Applications in Mission and Urban Theology,' *British Journal of Theological Education* 14, no. 2 (2004), p.160.

²⁴⁹ Walker, 'Perspectives from Ethnography,' p.160.

many clergy who are congregational leaders experience.²⁵⁰ Parish clergy are both part of the life of the parish and also, as representative ministers, in the liminal place between church and community. They are both part of a community yet also often having to lead it and hold the boundaries of it; truly both insider and outsider at the same time.

The practice of reflexivity is therefore crucially important in practical theology. It helps researchers to sensitise themselves to data. Iveta Todorova-Pirgova asserts that 'one of the most complex cognitive processes is self-analysis' but self-analysis must certainly be undertaken if ethnographic research into spirituality is to be more than merely self-referential and context-bound.²⁵¹ Learning from the social sciences reflects the interdisciplinary nature of much contemporary qualitative research.²⁵² Using strategies already established in the social sciences can give a degree of distance and objectivity; the opportunity to reflect upon the world in which are immersed from a different vantage point for a while. This striving for personal self-awareness is an aspect of trying to see one's own assumptions and prejudices, which need to be made clear if practical theology research is to benefit the wider church. Each researcher needs to find a discipline which supports this; through this particular piece of research, I found the following helpful:

²⁵⁰ I readily acknowledge that modes of ministry are broadening within the Church of England, and that a significant number of clergy are now non-stipendiary ministers, living in their own homes. I write in this instance primarily about clergy who have leadership of a congregation, and who remain deployable, whether paid or not.

²⁵¹ Todorova-Pirgova, Iveta, 'Native Anthropologist': On the Bridge or at the Border,' *Anthropological Journal on European Cultures* 8, no. 2 (1999), p.171.

²⁵² Jennifer Mason frames some important questions for putative researchers: Mason, Jennifer, *Qualitative Researching* (London: SAGE, 1996). See also: Mason, *Qualitative Researching*. Marshall, Catherine and Gretchen B. Rossman, *Designing Qualitative Research*, 3rd ed. (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1999).

- ‘Stepping back’ regularly to review and remind myself of the original drivers of the research²⁵³
- Keeping a research journal, and re-reading it at regular intervals
- Taking a yearly break to discuss and reflect with supervisors, colleagues and peers on the Doctoral programme²⁵⁴

Negotiating power relationships

In a book which has become a seminal text in anthropology, Clifford and Marcus write about power in ethnography and how in the past 'ethnographic work has been enmeshed in a world of enduring and changing power inequalities it enacts power relations.'²⁵⁵ This comment was made in 1986, and although much has changed since then to make the ethnographer and her aims, strategies and prejudices more visible in the texts produced, the statement itself is probably still true. Around the same time, Marilyn Strathern made clear some of the power issues involved in auto-ethnography. She points out that it is researchers who make use of their data, 'for ends of their own making', and that this can be 'experienced as exploitation when people perceive that others have the power to turn data into materials whose value cannot be shared or yielded back to them in return.'²⁵⁶ Perhaps things have changed a little since then, as in my specific case, there has been and will be a sharing of data, although this certainly does not even up the power balance.

²⁵³ It is all too easy to become immersed in the minutiae of research, especially in the practical phases, and lose sight of your original and over-arching concerns.

²⁵⁴ The DMin/DThM Summer School provided this possibility and was very valuable.

²⁵⁵ Clifford, Marcus, and School of American Research (Santa Fe N.M.), *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, p.9.

²⁵⁶ Strathern, 'The Limits of Auto-Ethnography,' p.20.

The style of reporting ethnography distances the researcher from the researched, because research becomes academic discourse, a language very remote from the original context. Fourteen years later, Karen McCarthy Brown, reflecting on her writing of *Mama Lola, A Vodou Priestess in Brooklyn*, writes about the position of the author in the text and how this has changed over the years. It is now expected that the author will be visible in some way but she asserts there is still a 'disequilibrium' of power. She says that including self in the text has been seen by some as 'dangerously self-indulgent' and that now 'many critics think the presence of the researcher in an ethnography can demystify the authority of the text, but there is little agreement about how that can be done.'²⁵⁷ In any research project there are inequalities of power. Power rests with the researcher, who is in control of the agenda and may have very specific aims in mind, which they communicate more or less fully to the research participants. Clergy are in a specific position of power vis-à-vis the congregations they serve. Although we use the language of service, the Church of England is currently also using a lot of leadership language in clergy training, and those in leadership positions wield power of some kind. The ordinal indicates the Church of England's understanding of the power and the responsibilities of priesthood and the induction service of a new Vicar illustrates this very powerfully, when the priest kneels before the Bishop, who says, 'Receive the cure of souls, which is both mine and yours.' This formula suggests that many of the congregation might invest their priest with some sort of spiritual power; something clergy need to be aware of and handle very cautiously, particularly when they address themselves to nurturing the spiritual life of others.

²⁵⁷ Brown, 'Writing About "The Other", Revisited,' p.132.

I wanted to be as open as possible about the intentions of my research, but I was also aware of a tendency to play down the emphasis on spiritual change.²⁵⁸ This was because of my awareness that some participants might wish to ‘manufacture’ change in some way, to please or impress me. There was also the risk of inducing anxiety or guilt in those who felt that the course had had no effect upon them whatsoever. However, there was an awareness in the participants that the input was purposeful and three of the participants asked me in the second interview process whether or not I thought I had observed change in them, the subtext being presumably, change *for the better*. I found myself reluctant to answer this and said that I had not yet been able to reflect adequately on what had happened, but it heightened my awareness that they ascribed to me the power to discern spiritual growth.

Summary

In this chapter I have outlined the context of this auto-ethnographical project and have considered in detail the planning and practicalities of the action research phase. From this experience of research, reflections on the nature of auto-ethnography itself have been offered, with particular wisdom and examples of good practice which will benefit other religious practitioners who wish to research their own contexts. In the next chapter, I turn to the analysis of the gathered data, within which we hear the voices of the participants speaking for themselves.

²⁵⁸ In retrospect, I am sure this is why I entitled the course ‘Exploring Prayer’, rather than including a reference to change or growth.

Chapter 5 - Findings and Analysis

‘Tread carefully because you tread on my dreams’
W. B. Yeats

This chapter offers analysis of an original dataset and maps the process of change in the participants. Some factors which appear to precipitate growth and change are identified from the comprehensive data analysis and some theory-building is outlined in the final section of the chapter. At the beginning of this chapter, some findings from the coding process itself are considered, before moving to examine in detail the participants’ own responses.

Statistical results from selective coding

It proved extremely informative to focus on the nodes which proved most significant in this study, distinguishing between nodes on the number of words spoken and this chapter largely concerns the illustration of those significant emphases.²⁵⁹ We also consider what was of little importance to the participants, and we deal with those results first. There is only one place where doubt is mentioned spontaneously, other than in response to the question about doubt. None of the participants was greatly troubled by doubt, although all had doubted from time to time. Doubt was not seen as a challenge to faith, but simply accepted as part of being a believer. This supports earlier pastoral experience where I have observed that churchgoers are little assailed by doubt, whereas for non-believers and seekers, doubt is, and is considered that it *should* be, a key issue and a barrier to belief. Challenges to faith like natural disasters are far more significant *as challenges* to non-believers or agnostics than regular church attenders.

²⁵⁹ The table is shown as Table One below.

Death is also a minor concern; only six participants spoke about the end of life and what may be beyond it, and very few expressed anxiety about it. This echoes Paul Wink's findings, a researcher involved in the long-term longitudinal US study, the Institute of Human Development, who critiques the prevailing view that older people turn to faith as a way to deal with the fear of dying: 'The preponderance of evidence suggests that although religious involvement increases among the elderly, the magnitude of the change is modest and it does not support the contention that large numbers of older Americans turn to religion in order to deal with issues of mortality.'²⁶⁰ The participants in my study expressed curiosity and acceptance rather than fear of death.

There were a number of other smaller nodes: avoiding God; blaming God; church background; compassion; confession; Holy Communion; evangelism; evil; fear; forgiveness; freedom; guilt; hope; humility; images of self in relation to God; influence of internet/place on spirituality; miracles; preaching; sacrifice; self-justification; silence; sin and time. It is surprising to see some 'cardinal Christian virtues', like forgiveness, hope and compassion featuring so little in people's thinking but perhaps this was because the input was about prayer and the questions looked at the individual relationship with God. However, there was a lot of emphasis on what people considered to be Christian behaviour and this tended to focus around acting justly; being generous; being caring of others and striving to do good. The most significant nodes are shown in the table which follows.

²⁶⁰ Wink, Paul, 'Religious and Spiritual Development in Adulthood,' in *Handbook of Research on Adult Learning and Development*, ed. Cecil M. Smith and Nancy DeFrates-Densch (New York and London: Routledge, 2009), p.441.

Node Significance	Node title	Words coded at node
Extremely significant > 25,000 words	Spiritual experience	36,569
Highly significant >20,000	Reliance on God ²⁶¹	25,200 (105 references)
	Role of church	25,105
	Influence of family	23,664
	Change provoked by course/sermons	22,491
	Christian behaviour	21,767
	Submission to God	21,352 (95 references)
Very significant > 15,000	Pattern of prayer	19,946
	Significant life events ²⁶²	18,360
	Reactions to course/sermons	17,999
	Self-awareness	17,162
	Bible	17,083
	Nature of prayer	17,027
	Question 2 'about the course' ²⁶³	15,683
	Unbidden images of God ²⁶⁴	14,898
Significant > 10,000	Petitionary prayer	14,256
	Prayer generally	13,612
	Influence of clergy	13,285
	Community/the corporate ²⁶⁵	12,427
	Challenges to faith	11,646
	Effects of course/sermons	11,508
	Change ²⁶⁶	11,238
	Questioning God	10,877
	Relationship with God	10,316
	Feelings about faith	10,239
	Question 1 'doubts'	10,031
	Free will	9,903
Of lesser significance 5,000 to 10, 000	Group dynamics	9,327
	Obedience	8,875
	Christ ²⁶⁷	8,321
	Effects of prayer	8,321
	Listening to God	8,302
	Discipline	7,989
	Making meaning ²⁶⁸	7,887
	Difficulties in prayer	6,898
	Openness	6,559
	Outcomes of spiritual experience	6,515
	Nature of God	6,369
	Gratitude	5,153

²⁶¹ The nodes 'reliance on God' and 'submission to God' had overlap, in that some passages clearly could be coded to both nodes. In total there were 200 references made to these nodes and 41 of these were coded to both nodes. There is both a similarity between them, but also something which defines them as different. Merging these nodes would have put them into the 'extreme significance' category.

²⁶² Participants spoke mostly about traumas and struggle rather than happy events.

²⁶³ This generated a far bigger response than any other single question, indicating impact.

²⁶⁴ Codes only where people spoke spontaneously about their image of God, rather than in response to the direct question.

²⁶⁵ If corporate prayer was merged into here it would move up, adding 3,416 words

²⁶⁶ Codes where people spoke generally about change, rather than change which was associated directly with the prayer course and sermon series.

²⁶⁷ There was no question specifically mentioning Christ.

²⁶⁸ Only codes words not in direct response to the question.

Mapping the process of change

First, we look at how people talked about their spiritual experiences and described their lives of prayer. Then we consider the idea that spiritual growth is possible and can be nurtured by looking at how the participants both exhibited and spoke about the growth factors I identified. Close analysis of the interviews and feedback from the participants in this study indicated that there are certain key common experiences in the spiritual life, which are explored and illustrated with quotations from the participants below. Within the data, I identified factors which seem to contribute to beneficial change in the spiritual life and have grouped these as external and internal factors. Key external factors which support spiritual growth are:

- validation
- the provision of ‘safe space’
- the experience of significant life events
- the bible.

Validation is the term I have chosen to describe the ways in which an external agent might be expected to affirm, acknowledge and recognise the spiritual life of another. ‘Safe spaces’ are places in which to ask questions and try things out. A safe space might be offered in different contexts; the ones which were important for the participants in this study were: a supportive family, especially in the early years; a positive experience of church and a ‘safe’ peer group, which is what the course attempted to offer. The ‘significant life event’ was often an experience of suffering and although a large proportion of the participants spoke of traumatic events like a suicide in the family, stillbirth and the death of children and life threatening physical and mental illness, they did not themselves connect those events with their own spiritual growth. However, it seemed clear in the analysis that these experiences had

been profoundly formative and that the way they had been dealt with had contributed to greater spiritual maturity in the participants who spoke of such events. A further significant influence seems to be the bible. Although the course and sermons focussed on personal prayer, there were a very significant number of spontaneous references made to the bible, which is especially noteworthy as the bible was not itself mentioned in any of the interview questions. These factors originate outside the person; hence they are termed 'external'.

It has also been possible to identify 'internal' factors which also precipitate change:

- realisation
- learning (or re-learning)
- the practice of personal prayer
- surrender

The word 'realise' comes over and over again as people talk about their response to the spiritual input offered by the course and sermon series. It is used to cover the ideas of making connections, seeing into a situation anew or afresh; recognising something to be true, or something being made 'real' in the life of the participant. These moments of realisation do not describe things taught, or given by a human other, but describe something emerging from within the self. If we accept that the human spiritual relationship is with the divine 'other', then we could say that the trigger for all these 'realisations' might be the divine 'other'; in Christian terms, perhaps the Holy Spirit. Learning remains important for adult Christians and we should not underestimate how hungry people are for spiritual teaching, guidance and companionship. Many of the participants were very appreciative of being informed about possibilities and guided in experimentation for themselves. Many expressed

surprise that there were so many different ways of praying; most of them had had little or no guidance and help with personal prayer during their time as regular church attenders, which for many of them was a long time. At the risk of stating the obvious, there were a lot of references to prayer; inevitable in a study which used prayer as its focus, and it would be easy to dismiss the significance of this as a result; but careful examination of the responses indicate that those who practised prayer privately were more likely either to feel that they were growing in faith or to exhibit the other indicators of maturity which are outlined here. Personal prayer seems to be important for transformation and growth. Last in this discussion of internal factors influencing growth, of particular note is a constellation of ideas which express need of God, variously described as ‘giving in to God’, ‘making space for God’, ‘submitting to God’ and ‘relying on God’. These modes of thinking are grouped together under the umbrella term of ‘surrender’, a term which I have reclaimed and explored earlier in this thesis.

The main presentation of the core findings of the research begins with illustration of the reality of spiritual experience in the lives of churchgoers. Verbatim quotations are used and as far as possible the flow of the speech is kept; however, some repetitions and verbal tics have been removed for ease of understanding.²⁶⁹

Spiritual experience

It was striking how often people said that they had never spoken to anyone before about spiritual experiences, even those closest to them. This indicates how close to

²⁶⁹ Questions and interjections on my part are shown in brackets prefaced with my initials DW; words which were emphasised by the speaker are shown in bold; pauses are shown by dots. Words which are non-grammatical but appear in everyday speech are rendered as they sound, a prime example being ‘cos’ which takes the place of ‘because’.

the core of one's sense of self these experiences are, and how carefully people guard them. I did not explore directly why these experiences were considered to be so private, but this might be an interesting area for future research. I surmise various reasons for this; fear of ridicule, or that one's sanity might be under threat; the lack of knowledge about historical and contemporary spiritual practice or the lack of space and encouragement in the Church of England simply to talk about and acknowledge such experiences. These remain surmises however, as the interviews did not deal with this question. The questions did however elicit a great deal of information about spiritual experience and I had a sense a lot of the time that people were often relieved to find that someone else could recognise and accept their experiences. This was particularly true of those who were nearer the beginning of their life of faith, those we might term 'less mature'. Those who had had longer times as practising Christians (not synonymous with calendar age) were less likely to express relief, seemingly to have greater confidence that their experience of God was real and that it could be accepted and relied upon. It was as though their experience of God had been tested and not found lacking and this had created an inner assurance and confidence. Even so, they still found it unusual to talk about these interior experiences, and appreciated the opportunity to do so.

Sometimes participants talk about spiritual experience which they name as such, at others times they describe experiences which would be recognised by other people of faith as authentic. All the participants spoke of something which could be interpreted as spiritual experience at second interview stage, whereas only 14 had described such experiences in the first interviews. It seems unlikely that spiritual experiences would be new to so many of them, so perhaps this could be attributed to

an increasing willingness to be open and a greater confidence in the process of being interviewed, and it is possible that the course and sermons helped people to recognise authentic spiritual experience for themselves and gave them language with which to describe them. The participants spoke about spiritual experiences in many different ways, which are fully illustrated in what follows.²⁷⁰

Sebastian talks about ‘being directed by God’:

It's a bit like, again, a poor analogy perhaps, but you know, if you're on, I imagine what it might be like on a movie set, you're the actor there and you just can't get it so you turn to the director and say 'Look, just where do you want me?', and the director says “Well, just take two steps to the right will you?”, and it'll look much better from there. It's that sort of process of actually turning round and saying 'I've got stuck'. And God leaves you alone until you say you're stuck ... then when you get stuck, and you realise you're stuck, and sometimes it takes you a while to realise you're stuck, is turn round and ask the director, because the director's got, you know, he's in, he's got the overview and he can say, well just two steps to the right, or take that silly hat off, or whatever it is, and it works.²⁷¹

This both describes something of his experience of God and also how he feels he has had to learn to ‘give in’ or surrender to God something of his own will in order for things to ‘work’, as he puts it. He also describes how he feels that there is only so much of this type of communication with God he can stand at any one time:

I suppose it's a bit like a mobile phone,... for whatever reason, the connection just falls apart and you have to redial. Or it's a bit crackly and you can't hear. You don't always, I don't always feel that the connection is broadband straight through all the way, it doesn't happen that way, sometimes. Sometimes it is, and when it does happen like that, when you do feel that

²⁷⁰ I have used verbatim quotations but have removed some repetitions, stammers and verbal tags, for example, ‘sort of’, and ‘you know’ where they appear in great number. However, I did not wish to ‘prune’ to the extent that the real style of expression is lost. Pauses are indicated by dots and emphasis by bold type. Non-verbal communication is in round brackets and italics. Occasional interjections by me are shown in round brackets, prefaced by my initials DW. Explicatory words are in square brackets. Omissions of words spoken by the participants are shown by three dots enclosed in square brackets.

²⁷¹ Pseudonyms are used for all the participants, the real identity of each pseudonym is known only to me and my transcription assistant: participants themselves do not know the pseudonyms used.

connected, it's something you only want to stay connected for a little while cos the amount of information that comes down keeps you going for quite some time afterwards to sort of work it all out.

He speaks about those ways in which you recognise things you have been thinking about in the words of hymns or the sermon, as though there are messages there intended for you. This is a common spiritual experience; people often speak of words of the bible, or less often other texts, seeming to 'fly off the page' and address them, speaking directly into their situation or answering or posing a crucial question. In his interview Sebastian also describes being emotional during worship, with a real sense of being uplifted – 'there are times when I'm at a church service I feel I could almost fly.' He is relatively near the beginning of his faith journey, coming to faith in early middle age, about two years prior to this study. When asked why he wanted to come on the course, he talks about what is sometimes described as the 'honeymoon period' of early faith.

If I'm going to keep growing, then you've got to keep watering the garden haven't you, and you can't ... I say I'm a bit erratic and there are days when perhaps I don't pray for three or four days in any way shape or form necessarily, I've been too wrapped up in other things and sometimes then you go, oh goodness me I feel very troubled, and you stop and think and you say well, hm, yeah you haven't really sort of had a chat with God, have you, for two or three days. Maybe you're not troubled, maybe he's ringing the doorbell and you're not answering the door! So just open the door and let him in.

In his second interview, Sebastian has moved towards an understanding that God is not there at his behest, and that often he may not even understand what is happening in prayer:

When I don't have the expectation, you know, that God is going to (*clicks his fingers*) respond to me - erm, that when I feel closest. That's when I open up best of all. That's when I sense ... I feel closer to God, or in God's presence in that sense, and most receptive. And then the things that come back ... they don't very often ... relate, .. specifically to anything that I've necessarily been praying about. Or at least, if you like, not in the immediacy of what I feel the

answer is. And sometimes, It's a bit like looking down the tube (*mimes a telescope*) you know, if you like. And you can't see the other end of the tube, but then, God turns the tube round and says well, look down the tube that way. When you first, well you think, I still can't see the end of the tube, but actually, you get further towards ... what you're trying to achieve, by doing it God's way, if you like.

He has come to a more nuanced view of how he thinks his free will meshes with God's care for him.

I can't make God appear, I can't call him on the phone, I can't ring a bell. I can pray and sometimes ... you're there. But I can't walk out of here and say I know I'm going to pray later, which I will, in some way, and I'll get that feeling right here. I can't know that. Erm, but I know that if I **really** need it, it will happen. I know that if I am, if I really, really need God in here (*points to his heart*) because I'm in trouble, and I don't mean if I've done something naughty or stupid, but I'm in trouble, and I really need God, God will come..... But he doesn't pander to you, he's not errr, ...he's not holding your hand all the time. You can only learn, well I only learn by trial and error and I think God understands that. So God lets me go off and when I fall in a ditch he picks me up, and goes 'Don't fall in a ditch', you know. And I wander off again, until I fall in another ditch or down a pothole, you know, 'Get out there, go on', and that's when God comes. ... And that's the only way I can learn, and God recognises that.

Wendy describes trying to get 'over the threshold' of the church. She saw three different people in a week who all mentioned something to do with the church, and she took this as a 'sign'. She is concerned; not about the interpretation she has placed on this, but about how talking about this might make her appear to others.

We'd been to the Methodist chapel and they'd been extremely welcoming, I can't put it down to anything, but it just didn't feel right. You know, Reverend D___ had at that time said perhaps give the church (*i.e. the Church of England*) a go and that took some time in happening because again it's making that physical move through the door isn't it, which was triggered by seeing those three people all within a week or two and mentioning something to do with the church. So that was the trigger to actually coming through the door. Er ... I think it was meant to happen. (DW: Is that how it feels?) Yeah. Yes I do. There was enough, sort of, leading up in our thoughts that it felt as if it was meant to happen, it was the final trigger to get us through the door. I hope that doesn't sound daft.

She also speaks of the feeling she associates with God and the way she thinks God responds to her prayers:

One of the things I really struggled with, is, ... you, during one of the sessions you talked about expectations and do you feel cross and do, you know, if your prayers aren't answered, and I, I, had a strong sense of well no, absolutely not. If they're not, they're not, kind of thing. There are no huge expectations that they will be answered that day, or the next month, but just that I will be supported, ... but that then made me question, is that because I don't expect them to be? Is it, you know I've not had this great, bolt out of the blue, or experience that other people have described. It is just a feeling of warmth, serenity, being surrounded, those sorts of feelings.

These words flow very naturally, there is no searching to find the right expression and when I ask her a bit more about those feelings, she elaborates: 'Just God being round me. Just feeling, erm, **protected**.' This last word she is very sure about and although she has been unable to identify any particular visual image of God, some of the words from the centring prayers have had an impact, in particular the phrase 'Draw nearer'.

DW: Is that, from God? (Yes) Is that God saying those words?

Wendy: Yes, (*reflective, then suddenly wishes to make the next point clearer*) and also, it's me saying those words. Very definitely, probably yeah, more, **more** so, it's **me** saying those words.

Annie has been a practising Christian for many years, but has also had periods in her life when she has not attended church. Her faith is anchored by a conversational and direct relationship with God and is not reliant on her church-going, which she sometimes finds difficult. She leads a busy life with many demands on her time and is the only believer in the family. In the first interview, she describes a rich prayer life which is squeezed into bus journeys and short walks. After the course, there has been a change to her spiritual practice:

I am managing actually, even if it's just ten minutes, to just **be quiet, on my own**, um, with God. And that's um, and that's just, I don't do anything other than just sit. Sit and .. wait, I suppose. (*The way she says this is immensely moving and powerful*) I don't quite know what I'm waiting for, but I just know that I have to sit and wait.

Betty seems to talk around the subject of spiritual experience in her first interview, but is much more willing to come to the point in the second one. She describes the experience of words seeming to 'leap off the page', in the bible but also in poetry and even in detective novels. For her, this is definitely connected with God: 'If you believe in God, and you believe that God is anywhere, then God's everywhere. I mean if he's not everywhere, then he isn't; if you see what I mean.' She talks about the difficulties of listening to God: 'I suppose I just try, ... to be quiet, ... and, not,... actively talk. The same as you do if you're listening, .. in a conversation. You're quiet, you let them talk, and you listen, and hear.' Reflecting on these words I think that this is what Anglican churchgoers need help with – and why Ignatian spirituality is beneficial - because it gives practices and structures which encourage both self-awareness and awareness of God. She goes on to describe a time when she was very worried about her daughter and woke during the night:

I was asleep but I woke up sort of during the night, or half woke, and as clearly as anything, I mean I don't mean I heard the voice of God literally, but as clearly as anything in my mind was 'Oh ye of little faith' 'Behold the', the Sermon on the Mount, you know, 'Behold the lilies of the field Everything'll be alright. And after that I, I just stopped worrying about it (*She laughs and sounds emotional*) and of course it was alright. She met Phil on that course and she's married, been married for nine years and they've got [a daughter] and they're going to have another one. It was what she was **meant** to do. And it **was** alright.

Enid talks about often being angry with God. She is not sure whether this is prayer, but calls it 'an ongoing dialogue'. When asked whether that means there is a response, she says:

Only the feeling that I'm supposed just to get on with it and stop moaning about it if I'm, if I'm, you know. 'You know what to do really, you do know really what to do.' (*She says this as though it is God talking to her*). 'You know, it's in you, or I'm in you, or, you know, get on with it.' I've never heard a voice or had an actual physical feeling other than sometimes there's a sense of presence.

She goes on to say that this sense of presence is always unexpected, never at her command and is felt in certain special places, describing a moment from eleven years ago that it still very vivid. This moment was shared with a colleague who also recognised the experience of what is usually called 'the numinous.' Place was rarely mentioned by the participants as being important in spiritual experience, she is one of only three to specifically mention a place other than church as being of spiritual significance:

I suppose I'm sensitive to places I don't think it was because it was outside, it was because of the circumstances of, what was happening, ... but, the setting and the time of day and everything seemed to coalesce into this incredible ..., I didn't want to move, I didn't want to spoil it, I didn't want it to end, I wanted it to go on, it was a wonderful feeling. It was the most intense spiritual feeling I think I've ever had. I **think** what I said to Mary was 'This is incredible,' and she said 'Yes it is .. it is.' And we both stood, neither of us moved and we were both at the end of the day, you know, we were on our way home. Oh, it was quite a moment.

Interestingly, this particular experience was shared with and seemingly recognised by a companion.

Frankie, a younger participant with less experience of church, seeming to be at an early stage of the spiritual life, said:

It probably was just in times of need, when I maybe prayed before, and I've probably only prayed mainly when I've felt the need to pray, but now it's kind of become more of a peaceful feeling, and, so he's [God] definitely more there now than he was before, so I suppose you do feel as though you're getting closer. Which sounds really strange (*laughs*) saying that, but that's how it feels.

When asked if she depended on God in any way, Izzy said ‘I suppose I run things by him a lot Like you would do a close friend or a parent.’ In her second interview, she talks in more detail about wordless prayer. She feels she has difficulty putting things into words but then she realised that that might not be necessary. She says that when she worries less about putting things into words, she ‘hears more.’ When asked to describe this hearing, she says:

It’s like it’s your own, ... you’d think the answer would be that you hear a voice, but I don’t. It’s as if it’s my own thoughts, that’s how the ideas come into my head and maybe if you **weren’t** a Christian, you’d think, ooh, I just came up with that idea. You know. Um, but yes, sometimes I ... think and then ... reason sort of comes in, .. I mean I don’t hear a voice, there’s no, .. crashing and banging or flashing lights or anything, ..but, just thoughts, thoughts really come into my head. But it’s as if they’re my own thoughts, but I don’t think they are. I think they’ve been helped along.

Kate has a very committed pattern of daily prayer and a clear sense of being listened to, with an interesting take on how this might be happening:

It's just a **feeling** that I am being listened to. Sometimes I even think well maybe it's, cos sometimes I think to myself, well, how can God listen to all the millions of people in the world and then I think to myself, he probably, and this is me, he probably has disciples allocated to so many people and I always think well maybe that disciple will relay back to God and then I think, well, maybe God will listen to me sometimes. Bit stupid I know, but that's how I feel.

She expresses an absolute trust in God: ‘Whatever he decides, that is his decision as far as I am concerned.’ She is able to say this despite a tragic loss in her life. She describes a time when she felt that healing began after this loss:

God, I said, “I am **so tired** of praying for my son. Please help me.” And he did. And I’ll never, I told you about that feeling on the stairs when I looked out the window, it was a hot July day or night or whatever, it was boiling, absolutely boiling, I’d stripped the bed and everything. And all of a sudden this gust of wind came, really, I was frozen, absolutely frozen, ooh I said and I went back into bed and I just slept like a baby. Well now, I didn’t know anything about that until about a year later, this is before your time, Diane, and the vicar there, he said that the Holy Spirit can come through wind, a gust

of wind, fire, etc. And when he said that I thought, because it was after that that I started to pick up, if you understand. It's when that pain, ... when that pain **goes**. Even though it's always inside you, it's like ... someone throws something through your heart and it breaks it all up. Now that wound heals but that stone is always there when a death like that, well any death I should imagine of a child. But I swear he did help me to heal.

In the second interview she talks about her experience of the Ignatian meditations which had been done during the sermon series and also featured in monthly reflective evening services:

When I'm there at 6 o'clock, I am **away**, what I would call **away with it**. **I am there**. There was one meditation you did - ooh it was at the very beginning, I've **never forgotten** it. I told [my daughter] about it. It was to do with the Sea of Galilee, and walking – and I was **there**. Really and truly. I could **feel that** water, and I could see the sand, and I could see Jesus, and in my mind he didn't have a proper face, and I could see his feet, and the sandals, the disciples in the background, and I was following him.²⁷² I've tried meditation here, [her home] it's not always been successful by myself. It hasn't. I get fidgeting. And I think, relax, relax, you know. I'm probably better when I'm with quite a few people, and knowing that they're all, the same, and someone is leading me.

She is able to describe a clear need of God, and a powerful sense of the emotion experienced as, 'the lovely feeling you get from God when you **are communicating** with him.' When asked if she can say more about this feeling, she struggles to put it into words, but seems to think of God as a shield or protector, expressing a real trust in and dependence on God:

It's a happy feeling; it's a lovely feeling. You know, ah, ... and sometimes I **feel**, that he, ..well, I feel all the time he's listening to me, but **more times than others**. It's a feeling **around me**, and **within me**. Not a specific person, or anything like that. It's just, **I know**, and I can't go throughout the day, **without that feeling**. I just can't.

That sense of need of God, relying on God, which I have characterised as 'surrender' will be explored in greater depth when we look at the outcomes of change below.

²⁷² Spiritual directors report the inability to see the face of Christ during prayer and visualisations as a common spiritual experience.

Factors which precipitate growth and change

Having looked at how people speak of spiritual experience, we move now to look at the change factors highlighted earlier in the chapter: the external factors of validation; safe space; significant life events and the bible and the internal factors of realisation; learning; surrender and prayer

Validation

Drawing on both my years of experience as a parish priest and the specific dataset provided by this research, I conclude that one of the most important things that people in church congregations are searching for is some assurance that the spiritual experiences which they have are real and that the way they pray or communicate with God is acceptable, or 'alright' in some way. I think the best word to draw these ideas together is 'validation' rather than reassurance or affirmation, although they are undoubtedly part of what parishioners are seeking. Another way of summing this up might be to say that people are looking for reassurance that 'It's ok to be me.'

Validation includes affirmation, with its emotional overtones of support and encouragement, but people were also seeking something at an intellectual level, that their spiritual experience is real, that their unseen lives are authentic and that their spiritual practice is acceptable. It was interesting to notice that it was men as well as women who were looking for validation. Three people came to me after the course and interviews were completed and openly asked me whether I thought they had changed in some way. Some gender theories might suggest that it would be women who would seek this type of affirmation, particularly if they had low self-esteem, but in this case, it was one woman and two men. It is inadvisable to build an over-arching gender theory on a small and context-specific dataset, but my results are

indicative of the dangers of gender stereotyping. For example, even within the interviews, Charles is looking for affirmation:

I'm conscious that one's reactions may be too **shallow** in that one may have not lived a deeply, you know a deeply useful religious life. And therefore one's not opening the curtain because one's not able to. One doesn't get to the curtain to open it. (DW The curtain being?) Being, being salvation perhaps. One may have..., you think of Christ saying, "Not everyone who says Lord, Lord, will get to heaven." One may be out of the, out of the wheel, I don't know.

I think perhaps he is looking for the expression 'out of the loop' here, but this was spoken wistfully, with a real sense of humility and perhaps a hope of receiving affirmation and reassurance from his priest. Another of the male participants seemed to have quite low self-esteem, perhaps connected with childhood experiences, and reflecting on the wide range of responses from the six men in the study, I began to think that life experience and personality were perhaps more influential on spiritual growth than both age and gender. In his second interview, Sebastian 'fished' for reassurance and wanted to open up a conversation about how I thought he was progressing:

Well there would be one thing I, I would like to try [indistinct], I know you're trying to do the research-y thing, but I would like to ask you, cos you were listening to everybody, and was there anything that you picked up on that you thought, 'Hmm ... I'd like to know what he was thinking about when he said that, or why he said that?'

However, very close analysis of the participants' responses suggests that men and women look for validation in different ways. Women seem to be looking for assurance that 'It's ok to be me', whereas men want to know that 'It's ok to do it this way.' This may be a fine distinction, but I think it is there. Men were less likely to exhibit anxiety about praying for themselves *per se*, but were more concerned about

the details of their prayer practice and often bemoaned what they saw as their own lack of discipline. Neal talks about his worries:

I probably don't allow God enough time. That's probably one of my biggest problems, as being a Christian. And the reasons, one of the big reasons why I probably don't allow God enough **time** is that I probably spend too much time doing **work**. Um, because in order to do, .. in order to spend quality time with God, you've actually, you know, it's no good being absolutely shattered – you've got to spend some time with God when you are actually kind of fresh, um, and I spend most weeks, Monday to Friday, either working or trying to sleep.

He goes on: 'I say the Lord's Prayer every morning and I try and pray when I go to bed but I'm not probably as good at it, at praying, that I would like to be. And I find **discipline** in prayer quite difficult.' Sebastian also is anxious about discipline, and wonders how other people pray. As a relatively new Christian, trying to find this out is one of the reasons he came to the group:

You can think about God at any time and I don't, I haven't got and I don't know if I should get into the discipline, I haven't got into a discipline, er, perhaps I envisage other people might have done, which is, they wake up in the morning, they get out of bed and the first thing they do is get on their knees and pray, you know, or, or whatever. I don't know if anybody does that, and the last thing at night before they go to bed, er, you know, and I don't mean that in a disparaging sense, you know there may be people, nuns, monks or whatever, where prayer is a total way of life.

These nuances of emphasis in the way people look for validation may well reflect the 'essential difference' that Simon Baron-Cohen writes about, but in view of the small number of men in the sample, my suggestions are tentative.²⁷³ I do think it noteworthy though that of the six men in the study, three expressed anxiety about the way they prayed whereas the others seem to be very accepting of their own patterns. The ways in which the men sought affirmation were much more oblique. It was the

²⁷³ Baron-Cohen, *The Essential Difference*.

women participants who openly sought affirmation and expressed relief and delight that it had been offered through the course and sermon series.

An important aspect of the prayer course and sermon series was the stress on the acceptability of praying for oneself. Repeatedly in parish life I have encountered churchgoers who pray assiduously for others, using the model of intercessory prayer which is a part of most Anglican church services, yet they struggle to pray for themselves and need both to have this desire affirmed and validated and also to be given scope for and teaching in the potentially transformative practice of self-focussed prayer. Many of them have never done so and have the impression that it would be selfish or self-centred. Charles expressed concern about being encouraged to pray for and about himself and rationalised it to himself by saying that it might be alright to focus on oneself as long as it resulted in some action which brought some good to others. This of course corresponds with Ignatius' teaching. The Spiritual Exercises are not an end in themselves but are intended to further one's apostolic ministry. Following Ignatius' thinking on the transformative effect of personal prayer it seemed to me that allowing, indeed encouraging, people to pray for themselves was a key aspect of validation. Praying for themselves, with the exception of Charles' comment already mentioned, seemed to be less of an issue for the men in this study, but again I am hesitant to generalise from this, because I have known men in other contexts who have struggled with this idea. Struggling with the idea of being self-focussed, or feeling oneself self-centred in prayer might be more related to personality type than gender, though I suspect that gender may also play a part.

Men and women alike were often quick to compare themselves with others. When asked about the prayer course, Betty says,

I think what I've got out of it is a realisation about what you've been trying to stress, that there isn't a right way and a wrong way, to pray. That maybe what I've been doing **is okay**. I think, I'm not going to mention names because you're not, but one person right in the very first session - and it struck a chord with me because it was very much how I felt - she said she'd come along because she always felt that everybody else did it, could do it better than she did. And, I sort of thought, 'Yeah, I know what you mean'. I think I've got, what I've got from it is perhaps that what I do, what suits me, erm, perhaps **is okay**. You know, it is okay to be like that.

One of Wendy's reactions to taking part in the course was: 'I think the thing that was the most enlightening was realising that although I, .. felt that I didn't pray in any way outside **church** really, before going on the course, I actually probably do, every day of my life in some way, but I wasn't acknowledging it as such.' Through the course she has gained a broader understanding of the nature of prayer, and she now sees her own practice as valid. She goes on:

Cos I think, you know, coming to that first session, what I was, in my mind was, "Please, please, tell me it's okay to pray for **me**. Because then I can help other people", and you know, on a personal level, so for me that was **extremely** helpful because that set the scene then for the rest of it.

She continues: 'It was **extremely** useful the fact that from the outset you emphasised that this was about, about us, and it was okay to pray about us, because that's something that I **really, really** wanted, and when you said it, it was like, Wow!'. She sums it up: 'I think that's probably the main thing I have got from it, is that yes, there are a **lot** of different ways and it's probably, it's maybe okay to do what I do and not do it the way other people do it.' A little later she says, There isn't **just one** way,

there isn't a right way and a wrong way there's all sorts of different ways you can take to, different things you can do, and it's just a matter of finding what suits you, cos we're all different aren't we?' In her case, not only is her own practice of prayer validated, but she is coming to a broader acceptance of other people's spirituality alongside her own.

In her second interview she is much more articulate about her spiritual experience, though she also says she is more confused, but 'nicely confused.' She has found validation through the course, in discovering that her habit of reflecting on the day has its equivalent in an accepted Christian spiritual practice with a long history; the Ignatian examen. 'And that's something I've done for years and years, and done not just as a review of the day, what could I have done better, but a real, conscious communication, and I guess, er, I've felt during that day that that's what I have been doing, but it needed to get, ... I needed to get **better** at asking questions of God I guess.'

Ursula says, 'I think it was looking at the type of person you were, that one I found really useful, and sealed it for me, as I say, in the written work. Erm, ... I found, that erm, and that it was okay, ... to sit and write, you know? **That was good.**' There are similar reactions to the sermon series. Katie says that, 'Your sermons helped me to realise that I was right in what I do and say to God. And what he says and does to me. Maybe I'm not, I don't know. Only God'll know that. I'll know that when I get up there but that's what I feel ... sometimes I used to think to myself, "Er, well, maybe you're not doing it right, Katharine." I think I've said this before. But I feel now, that **I am.**'

Annie says that she still talks to God as though he is a friend in the room, but says,

I realise that what I'm doing now is I'm actually being kinder to myself. I'm not beating myself up so much for things that I think, 'I shouldn't have done that', or 'I could have done that better,' or um, 'I should be praying more often', or 'I should be reading the bible more often,' or, 'I'm not a very good person,' or 'I'm not a very good Christian'. I've actually started being kinder to myself because I've realised as we've been going along, that it's actually **okay** to pray for me. And for me to pray for me.

'Safe space': the importance of the group

A second factor which is important for spiritual development is the provision of a 'safe place' where both belief (cognitive) and spiritual experience (affective) can be explored, shared and tested without fear of criticism or judgment. For many in the study, these safe spaces had also occurred in earlier life in the context of the family and in supportive church congregations and sub-groups within congregations. Many participants spoke of influential family members from childhood or early adulthood, and in adulthood, church ministers, chaplains and bible study groups seemed to have provided impetus for growth. The participants presenting as the most spiritually mature (in my view) were also those who had had the experience of small group work of some type within their church lives. The importance of the shared experience was something that emerged at the second interview stage and was clarified and further explored during the analysis. Initially, the focus of the research had been more on the individual's personal spiritual experience.

The response to the group work done within the course was overwhelmingly positive, though occasionally people said they had been challenged by the material or by someone else's input in some way. For example, Wendy expressed some ambivalence, after hearing an account of someone else's spiritual experiences:

‘Sometimes I feel a bit disappointed that I’m not getting any, and have never had any, erm, ... you know, **really amazing** experience.’ This sort of comment shows how important it is to ensure that people understand that many differing types of mystical or spiritual events can be experienced, that they should not be differently valued, and that the spiritual life is not a context for human competitiveness. On the other hand, if sharing one’s personal spiritual experiences with others produces an increased desire for God in others, that might be interpreted as a good outcome of group work. The fact that these few negative comments were expressed shows a trust in the relationship with me as group leader and a basic confidence in the process, but that there could be more work done to build openness within small groups; something which would require a longer time frame than we had in this particular piece of work.

The group work was run with very clear parameters called ‘basic assumptions’.²⁷⁴ These were that the group was a confidential space; that spiritual experience was a journey which could be shared and in which we could learn from each other and that group members were to listen and speak without giving advice or judging each other. This last assumption required the most careful handling and occasional intervention from me as group leader to make sure that it was observed. The sermon series participants never met as a group, apart from in the final feedback session two years later, but I noted that five of the eight had had previous experience of supportive small groups in various church settings, both in Anglicanism and in the Church of Scotland.

²⁷⁴ These have been detailed in Chapter 4.

Many times, participants expressed the privacy of their spiritual experience and the group's importance in moving towards relationality. Katie was typical of many of the women: 'I think I've talked to you more than I've talked to anybody about my feelings and religion, cos I know it's between you and me, it's private. ... I've **never ever** talked to anybody like I've talked to you. I said to [my daughter], even to her I don't.' The men were less likely to speak about the privacy of their experience, but it was clear that it was not something that they shared with others very often.

Although women are often regarded as more focussed on relationships than men, there were some very striking correspondences between the way women and men talked about the value of the group experience. Simply sharing prayer and time given up to 'spiritual matters' was seen as valuable in itself, by both sexes. Sebastian said: 'You could be rowing the Atlantic in your own little boat with twenty other people doing the same thing. It's very lonely cos you're in your own little boat, yet if all twenty of you are rowing in the same boat together, that's a very different feeling.' Katie used a similar image: 'I changed my views on a lot of things, because you realise you know that er, other people are in the same boat as you. You think that you're the only one that's having difficulty praying, but other people obviously find it difficult at times.' Sebastian said later: 'I think there is absolute value in being in a group because .. when you're trying to, experience and practice things, it's not easy to do ... to be with other people who are also finding it difficult or a struggle, for different reasons, is of itself reassuring.' In talking about the session using icons, Annie said: 'I felt a companionship with the people I was sitting with.' In reflecting with her husband as to why she felt better after going to church, Catrina said:

He said, “Is it cos you had communion?” And I said, “Well no, it was just the fact that I felt so near to God, and that there was more than me that was there praying”.

Although the shared experience was clearly important and formative for both women and men, I think a nuanced emphasis can be detected, in that men spoke more clearly about learning from others, and mentioned relationship-building less often, whereas women laid a greater stress on the building of relationships, whilst also valuing learning highly. I would not wish to overplay this distinction, as there were also many correspondences in the way that both sexes spoke of the group experience and there were some instances where comments were made which would seem to contradict gender stereotypes; for example, the only person who talked about coming to church in order to ‘support’ others was a man and both Una and Charles spoke in exactly the same way about the discipline that being a group might impose, as a good thing for their own spiritual practice.

As indicated, an important aspect of the group as safe space is the chance to learn from each other. This was spoken of in remarkably similar ways by women and men. Quentin’s comment about reaching the end of the field in his tractor and simply turning the engine off to pray had clearly impacted Annie and Olwyn. Annie used the words ‘liberating’ and ‘eye-opening’ and said that, ‘it gives you a breadth that you don’t get any other way, than just talking with other people.’ Olwyn said: ‘When I heard people say, “Actually I’m sitting on my tractor” or “When I go for a walk” and I thought, “I go for a walk every day. Why don’t I do that?” And now I’m finding that **I am.**’ What the participants learned from each other often impacted their future spiritual practice. Sebastian had chosen to join in the course, ‘because I’m interested in trying to get other people’s perspectives on where they’re going, how

they see the journey.’ Wendy valued the diversity of age and experience within the group and said: ‘I think sharing with other people was useful, ... it was very clear from being in a group that everyone had different methods.’ She also said:

People **do** need to be involved because of the learning, it speeds up your learning, it speeds up your development, your spiritual development, people being around and I think that's one thing that I've really learned is that I **know** that I've come on or progressed so much more because of people being around and being in a church, than I would have done on my own. But that's something quite new.

Charles also spoke of an added dimension to this sharing; it was:

‘**Extremely** helpful to be in a group because one can stop concentrating on oneself for a start, which was incredibly ... important. You can get fixated about yourself. ... yes, it **does** help,you pick up quite a bit about how they are affected by it all. Or find problems with it. That sort of thing. I think it is very useful to hear other people's reactions, **very** useful.

Similarly Mina commented:

‘Things other people said, made you think and pitch on to other ideas. So, other people's opinions and beliefs and how they felt, kind of made you, .. made you look at things differently. And how you perceived something, somebody else might perceive slightly differently and it made you **widen** what you'd learned from it.’

Two course participants, George and Olwyn, had wanted to focus entirely on learning in the group rather than sharing, and hardly spoke during the ten sessions. They had both expressed concern about how that might be perceived by the others in the group, but I assured them that it would be acceptable. George said afterwards: ‘I know I don't talk a lot. I perhaps don't have a great deal of input in a lot of cases, but I do listen, and I have enjoyed it. And I've appreciated what everyone else has said.’ This was almost exactly echoed by Olwyn, who gained from hearing what others had to say. They both expressed the same fear of being ‘pounced upon’ and asked for a response and were glad that this had not happened, but they had been free to remain

reserved. In fact, one of the other men in the group had tried to draw George out towards the end of the course, and in his second interview with me, expressed some frustration that he had not been successful, seeming to think that George had wisdom that he was unwilling to share with the wider group.

A third aspect of the group experience which was noted and valued by men and women alike was the ‘overspill’ into the relationships in church. Neal and Angela both spoke of bumping into someone they knew from church in other contexts. Neal found this a help, ‘because not many of my friends are Christians’ and was very enthusiastic that a group should be formed in church to follow on from this research project. Mina said that following the course, her relationships with some of the people she met at church services had moved beyond the polite into something more trusting, open and authentic. Ursula said ‘you felt like you’d got some sort of affiliation with those particular people’ after doing the course together. There were other positive comments with regard to church life. Quentin said: ‘I love to come to church’ and correspondingly, Ursula said: ‘I value the time that I can go to church’. Charles thought that church ‘produces a camaraderie with other people’ and Wendy ‘felt as if I kind of got to know people to such an extent that now I’d feel very comfortable about going to them in church and having a little chat.’

Even those who were in the sermon group and therefore not doing anything interactive together, were quick to affirm the value of groups they had shared in, in the past. Una spoke of discovering the ‘power of prayer’ through a bible study group when she was in her early thirties: ‘And we just felt we’d a huge, big world opened to us, you know, we’d just all, our faith just blossomed and it was a remarkable time for

us.’ She describes how she moved away from a judgmental image of God: ‘I think it probably was bible study and discussing it with other Christians. And possibly just becoming more aware, as your faith grew, you realised that it was all to do with this loving God.’ Richard and Sue, a married couple, described a very supportive group in a previous church, where they had struggled with an important decision. Sue: ‘We ranted and raved, we prayed, we had our whole house group praying cos we were convinced that N_____ was where we should be.’ Richard continued: ‘But no, here we are in S_____, x years further down the line.’

Although there was clearly a very significant emphasis on the value of the group sharing of spiritual experience which emerged through the research, there is also a further aspect of the idea of safe space which can be affirmed: the value of being alone within a group. This corresponds to the experience of silent retreats, where one can be with a group of people and feel great solidarity and support whilst not communicating directly in any way. The prayer course provided a taste of this type of spiritual practice, as each session included a time for people to pray in silence on their own. This was also formative. Effie spoke of finding silence as the giving of a safe space: ‘

It's only been mainly when I've come down to church **to** the prayer groups where I've been able kind of to get away, get away from the environment, and because I think sometimes you can be distracted, you know I can sit here quietly but, I don't know if the phone's going to ring. I don't know if someone's going to knock on the door, whereas when you're down at church, if someone knocks on the door, you're not there, so it doesn't matter. Er, yes, it's just being able to find that little bit of, well, your own **space** really. And to be able to kind of go **within** yourself, and pray properly.

Significant life events

Another factor which emerged as formative during the analysis phase was the ‘significant life event.’ These events were largely of a severely challenging or traumatic nature, but two people spoke of spiritual experiences which could be described as sudden conversion events which had also been very significant for them. Some of the events were of such profound loss that it might be possible to identify individuals from a too close description of circumstances, so in the interest of protecting their confidentiality, some specific references are withheld and verbatim quotations are kept to a minimum. Of the 24 participants, 17 spoke openly of traumatic life events which they felt had shaped and influenced their faith. This was not in response to a direct question, but emerged in responses to questions about doubt and challenges to faith. The events included the suicide of a child, the suicide of a father; serious mental illness in one participant and in a child; nervous breakdown; neo-natal death; the birth and subsequent loss of handicapped child; serious illness and death of parents; death of life partner; divorce; treatment for life-threatening diseases; career problems and depression. As we might expect, when asked what gave their life meaning, responses were grouped around love and relationships, but the experience of suffering and the response to it was often described as learning more about oneself and coping only with God’s help.²⁷⁵

Neal lost his father to suicide when he was a teenager: ‘I dumped everything on my faith ... in fact, my faith kind of held my family together. I think often it’s when you most need God that he’s most obvious.’ Later on, when asked about how well he

²⁷⁵ It might be noted at this point that all the participants were churchgoers at the time of the research. I can only assume that there will be people for whom the experience of such traumatic life events will have caused a loss of faith, but this study deals only with people attending church.

thought he knew himself, he reverted to the same subject, ‘I think there are events which help us to get to know ourselves better, and in particular I think **extreme events** help us to get to know ourselves better – how do we react when things are put on the line.’ This profound experience of suffering had also caused him to develop a sophisticated and well-informed theology of suffering, and his analytical approach to this probably reflects his personality and learning style as much as his gender:

Bonhoeffer said something along the lines of, ‘only a suffering God will do.’ You know, ‘Only a universe in which God suffers with us, is a universe that makes sense to me’. And I think I share that sentiment. It doesn’t make sense otherwise. And somehow, I’m not prepared to have an existence which doesn’t make sense. And no other theology makes sense. ... I’ve persuaded myself that there’s got to be a God there, and more than that, the only God there can be, the only God that makes sense, is the Christian God. It’s the God who abdicates, um, um, the Philippians thing, whatever it is. That is the only sort of God that makes sense.^{276 277}

Although Neal had felt ‘it’s when you’re at your lowest point that often you feel closest to God,’ for Olivia the opposite was the case: ‘Sometimes, yeah, you feel life is not, you know, if you’re not very happy, you feel further away from God.’ Apart from these opposing views, the responses of men and women were very similar and Olivia said elsewhere: ‘I’ve found that circumstances of my life have you know, felt that he’s [God] been there and led me ...or helped me through whatever I’ve had to go through.’ Richard spoke about how he had grown in response to difficult experiences: ‘Now I can take a longer view and say, yes, trust is important and at the time it may be very horrible to go through but, erm I think we’re **better** people for it.’ Katie also felt that the suffering she had gone through had made her ‘a better person

²⁷⁶ Philippians 2:5-11.

²⁷⁷ We might note that there was a wide range of educational achievement amongst the participants and Neal was one of the highest achievers in these terms, being educated to post-doctoral level.

... it's made me more compassionate, ... more understanding of people who need understanding.'²⁷⁸

People spoke of the general battering of life; but they spoke much more clearly about how they had relied on God in times of crisis.²⁷⁹ Catrina's comment is typical:

When Brian was dying of cancer, I needed God to talk to and be there, all the time. I didn't want to lose him (*this is a long time ago but there is still emotion in her voice*) but in the end he was in so much pain, I kept saying 'God, whatever, your will be done. If you take him, at least I know he's going to a better place'. So, in my times of trouble and distress, God's been there.

Sebastian speaks of finding the beginning of healing of a difficult childhood in prayer: 'Those drivers that were there were based on all that regret, all that anger, all that frustration, ... those drivers are changing, and so prayer in that sense has been especially valuable to me.' Angela identified that the times she prayed more were the times when 'I've got more turmoil in my life probably. Where I completely know that I can **rely** on him' [God]. Echoing Neal's comment on self-awareness, Una also felt that a crisis in her life brought self-knowledge and a closeness to God:

You just got to a stage where you thought, "Well, I'm doing my best – it's in God's hands. And he'll live as long as God wants him to live." Somebody pointed out to me, "What have you learned through that time?" I'd learned an amazing amount of stuff. I'd learned how to be **patient**, I learned **loads** about myself and about our relationship. It really, whereas I think it can split people, .. it bonded Robin and I. But it was this feeling – God, we're doing our best we can. God sent us people. You know, to deal with that. We'd friends that just came at the right time, who would land in. My mother was a Godsend, definitely.

²⁷⁸ She asked me to withhold the specific circumstances, this was the only time this request was made during all the interviews. Several people said they were very happy to be both quoted and identified, but I have maintained pseudonyms throughout the study.

²⁷⁹ Sue used the expression, 'We weathered a few storms together' and Mina said, 'I think you do change as life attacks you on the way.'

It might be said that in any group of 24 people with ages ranging from 30 to over 80, examples of these types of traumatic experiences would be found. This may well be the case; however I am suggesting that there is something distinctive in the way people who mature in faith have been able to endure suffering, integrate it into their life experience and ultimately, grow through it. The experience of suffering has in many cases contributed to increasing self-knowledge. Furthermore, they frequently attribute that ability to endure and survive directly to their belief in God.

The Bible

An interesting result of the analysis was the observation of the frequency with which the bible was referenced. This referencing was both direct and indirect, though none of the interview questions alluded to the bible, nor did the prayer course and sermon series focus on the bible, although inevitably it was mentioned. One of the ten sessions of Exploring Prayer dealt with meditative prayer using the bible and one of the sermons was about using the bible in meditative ways. This input specifically drew on Ignatian practice. The bible figured in people's discourse much more than I had anticipated and they used it in a variety of ways.

People used the bible in interpretive ways, to help them make sense of life and guide their actions. Olivia, in talking about what she thinks spiritual awareness is, says, 'Oh I'm hopeless at bible quotations or prayers but it's like being one of his sheep and knowing who you are isn't it, that sort of, that's how I feel about it, yes.' There were numerous references made to the Gospels, as might be expected in a Christian context, and in a specifically Anglican setting where emphasis is laid on reading

from and preaching on the four Gospels, but people ranged more widely. There were spontaneous mentions of three parables: The Widow's Coins; The Sower and The Wheat and the Weeds; also, Jesus cursing the fig tree; Martha and Mary; the resurrection appearance on the road to Emmaus; body of Christ imagery from Paul; light and darkness imagery from the first chapter of John, and the baptism of Christ, with occasional references to the Old Testament, particularly the Psalms and the Commandments in Exodus. The bible is also spoken of as setting a standard for Christian behaviour. When asked about the challenge to faith posed by events like the Boxing Day tsunami, Mina said: 'if we all lived how we were supposed to live according to the bible, an awful lot of these things wouldn't happen.' Her words were closely echoed in George's interview: 'I'm sure it's a better way of living if we followed the route set for us in the bible, then ... I **personally** think the world would be a better place.' Drawing on the Old Testament and the New Testament simultaneously, Katie talks about trying to follow the Ten Commandments and the difficulty of 'turning the other cheek.' There was a sense in some participants of the bible as a vehicle of God's self-revelation, and for Olwyn, one of the newer Christians, this was a new experience which had been fostered through the prayer course: 'It's when I was meditating with the bible, and I think in the literature you'd spoken and said that, you know if there's any particular line or verse that you're drawn to, and there was. And to me that was his way of showing me and that was my first realisation that actually, yeah, this is how he can talk to you.'

Allusions to the bible were there in almost everyone's discourse, across the age and educational range. Although both sexes referred to the bible in very similar ways, there was one difference which could be noted. Women showed a tendency to be

self-critical and to express guilt at not knowing the bible well, or reading it enough. Men did not express feelings of inadequacy, but two of them did express the wish to read the bible more, and Neal was very keen to establish a new bible study group after the sermon series. The men were more analytical in the comments they made about the bible, Neal spoke at some length about the parable of the wheat and the weeds and how that might explain the presence of evil in the world. Charles was concerned not to be too literal in his understanding of the biblical text and was exercised over how evolution squared with the idea of a Creator God. He also quoted some verses which had clearly sustained him over the years:

I think Christ's remark, 'Sufficient unto the day be the evil thereof' is often of help. You can be as circumspect and try and look after the future as best you can, but there's a limit to what you **can** do. You know, 'Come unto me all you that are heavily laden and I will refresh you,' I think that I've often said to myself, quoted to myself, and ... um, it is encouragement I get, consolation I get, hope I get, all these things.

Both sexes were drawing strength and guidance from the biblical text, and often wanted to know more, but it was notable that the women were more likely to frame this desire to know more as guilt-provoked response. There were also some descriptions of how the Ignatian bible meditations, which formed part of both the prayer course and sermon series, had impacted some of the participants. Katie was most eloquent on this:

I could see the road and I was walking behind Jesus, and those two followers ... he [Jesus] knew I was there, .. and he kept on turning round and smiling, and beckoning.²⁸⁰ I could, I mean I was away, and I was walking behind him ... and then I also was asked with him, at that table. I sat at the bottom of the table, .. and I could feel him. Like, er I don't know, it's funny feeling, communicating with me. Telling me ... not to worry so much over everything and everyone. I could just feel it. Then we had like, the wine and the bread,

²⁸⁰ The passage used for this meditation was Luke 24:13-33.

and everything, and I just came out of it. And I thought, yes, it did me good. It **really** did me good.'²⁸¹

Many people commented on the Ignatian meditations and they were often cited as one of the most transformative experiences of the course and the sermon series.

We look now at what was revealed about people's internal processing of their experiences.

Realisation

A key process word which came repeatedly across the interviews was 'realise'. This was used to describe either a growth in self-awareness or a growth in understanding something about God and the participant's relationship with God. Beverley Skeggs argues for experience as constitutive of who we are: 'I begin from the premise that it is not individuals who have experience but subjects who are constituted through experience.'²⁸² She also says that 'recognition is one of the means by which experiences are interpreted. ... Because we are constantly experiencing experience, moments of recognition may transform not just that which we recognise, but also that which has gone before and that which is to follow.'²⁸³ We can see this happening when Olwyn says:

I thought you [meaning herself], you know, you prayed for others and that was it, and I just didn't realise that actually, there's far more to it. You can have a conversation. And then when you [meaning me as course leader] would say things like, 'Well, you know, you will be answered', and I'm

²⁸¹ This is expressed in such a way that the intensity of the experience is still there in her later description of it, and can be powerfully heard on playback of the interview.

²⁸² Skeggs, Beverley, *Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable* (London: SAGE, 1997), p.27.

²⁸³ Skeggs, *Formations of Class and Gender: Becoming Respectable*, p.29.

thinking ... **how?** But then you realise, actually, it is, but in different ways. So it's really opened up my whole prayer life.

She speaks here of a process of working something out for herself which has been triggered by some of the input on the course, and then tested out in her own personal practice of prayer. She also speaks about how these realisations have altered her relationship with God:

Now if I have a difficult decision to make, I'll ask for guidance, well I'd never have done that before. It never occurred to me, I didn't think you could do that. Whereas now I do, so now I suppose in a way yes it must be that I do so more now because now I realise you can ask ... for that help and guidance.

Betty talks about how the experience of doing the course helped her to recognise her own spirituality better, in that she has realised for herself that poetry and music are ways in which she thinks God communicates with her: 'I didn't know that those things were, if you like, triggers for me, you know, something that, um ... but it made me realise how **much** they were.' For Wendy, the important realisation was more to do with recognising the reality of spiritual experience, rather than the nature of it. She said: 'I think the thing that was the most enlightening was realising that although I, .. felt that I didn't pray in any way outside **church** really, before going on the course, I actually probably do, every day of my life in some way, but I wasn't acknowledging it as such.' Annie speaks more about realising things that are true about herself. She is able to acknowledge that she is controlling by nature, and although she has known that she controls others, she has come to a realisation that she also does this to herself. In recognising this, she finds a type of liberation from it. She says:

I've been able to sort of realise through what we've been doing (*sighs*) that I don't need to do this. He [God] accepts me as I am. And yeah, with all the failings, cos hey, I've got 'em, and I actually don't have to pretend, and it's actually quite liberating.

Men and women alike talked about this process of realisation. Sebastian said: ‘The process of trying to come to God in different forms of prayer made me realise that I was, ... and it made me angry at first, that I was limiting my contacts, my ways of communicating, my ways of listening, my ways of sensing God.’ This process of something coming to the surface of consciousness, or emerging as real and authentic in someone’s experience is the same process that Ignatius wanted to encourage through the types of meditations and prayer practices of the Spiritual Exercises and these connections are considered more closely in the concluding chapter.

Learning

Alongside realisation, there was an inner process of learning, and in some cases, re-learning things which had been forgotten over time. This was not simply responding to exterior stimulus or the passive receipt of information, but an active, interior process of assimilating, appropriating and acting upon information for oneself. For some people at the beginning of the faith journey, the learning was very much to do with the broadening of horizons:

When you asked me about this Exploring Prayer, I thought, Exploring Prayer - well, what is there to **explore**? You just say your prayers; you say them either at morning or night and that's it. What else is there to explore? So it's been fascinating for me, it really has. (Olwyn)

Even for others who had been Christians for many years, there was still the possibility of encountering something different from their previous spiritual experience:

I want to add in,... about learning new things, .. as I hinted earlier – my background has not come from a tradition that’s even **contemplated**

meditation.²⁸⁴ Meditation is something, er, off the radar and it's always been, kind of a bit mystical kind of thing almost really, because my only encounter with meditation was through popular culture, in the Eastern influence. So to learn that actually meditation has a long **Christian** tradition, again that's new and it's something that, I'm not convinced it's for me, but that might be just me being stuck in my ways, and maybe **I do need actually to try** this. (Richard).

Izzy spoke about re-discovering 'how brilliant the Lord's Prayer is'. This is something she worked through for herself, as none of the course material or sermons focussed directly on the Lord's Prayer. Wendy was someone who had come more recently to faith and church-going and she spoke of having to learn some of the vocabulary of church life, which 'still felt alien' to her. Not understanding everything was a challenge, as she 'felt silly', but said that if she did not say she did not understand, then she would not learn. Learning was clearly something that was important to her and something she was determined to do. She describes this as a 'double-edged' experience: 'because it was least useful in that it made me feel uncomfortable but **very** useful in that I learned.' Interestingly, Sebastian also talked about how his learning could benefit others:

I'm a trial and error person and, er, God understands that, and that's great because I can fall down the pot hole and I can still, he'll still rescue me. And, 'I know you're stupid, and you know you're stupid, but it's ok, you can be stupid, just carry on and keep learning a bit more because other people will see you fall down the pot hole and go ha ha ha! and avoid it.'

Once again, although women and men both spoke about the process of learning, they used different emphases. Women were far more likely to use the word itself, and to express gratitude for opportunities to learn, whereas men saw new learning as a challenge which they needed to rise to. Individual learning styles also play a part,

²⁸⁴ This is one of the strengths and the challenges of the Anglican rural congregation; it brings together people from different spiritual backgrounds, who have to try to 'rub along' together.

and there are several theories about adult learning which could be explored further in conjunction with spiritual growth.²⁸⁵

Surrender

We have previously considered the idea of surrender as a key component of spiritual development. In Chapter 3, I asserted that it is only as we give up, surrender or yield ourselves to God that we discover our truest selves and begin to be the people God intended us to be. How far does the data collected during the interview process bear out this theory?

There seems to be a constellation of ideas here: a few participants spoke of needing God, or the church, rather more of them spoke about relying on or depending on God, and many of them couched their experience as ‘giving in’ or submitting to God, sometimes after times of questioning and evasion. A further dimension of change was the increased willingness to make more space for God and for prayer in their lives. Several people said that doing the course or sermon series had led them to spend more time ‘with God’ in some way and without exception they felt this benefitted them. The length of time spent as a practising Christian varied amongst the participants from a couple of years to their whole life (in some cases over 70 years) but the general pattern was that the longer a person had been a ‘practising Christian’, the more likely they were to talk about depending or relying on God.²⁸⁶ For Frankie, a fairly recent church attender, the idea of relying on God was something she had not given much consideration to:

²⁸⁵ This possibility is considered further in ‘Suggestions for further research’ in Chapter 6.

²⁸⁶ Using attending church worship regularly as the criterion.

I don't know if I depend on God but I think there'd be a gap without him, it wouldn't be the same. It'd be like losing a friend almost, not having that, that other person to talk to. But I don't know if the word depend is the right word ... I don't know what other word I could say, oh maybe missing, so maybe I do depend on him really, I don't know. (*Long pause*) Perhaps I do. I hadn't really thought of it like that before.

Neal, who had become a believer in childhood and had practised his faith in several different contexts, knew from personal experience that God had supported him in the past, especially when times had been very challenging: 'I coped reasonably well because I just threw everything onto God. And God dealt with it. ... I don't know if it was me coping, or it was God coping for me or what really.' That type of reliance on God had continued in adult life; Neal talked about asking God for help in situations where other people challenged his faith, and also described himself as supported by prayer in a recent family crisis. In reflecting on the sermon series, he spoke about the human sense of control being an illusion, and also began to ponder the extent of God's power to act, tentatively exploring the idea that there might be 'some rules which God is constrained to work within.' This was a very clear progression of his thinking from the first interview.

As well as expressing a need of God, people also talked about depending on God. Richard and Sue talked about praying and asking for guidance over career and house move decisions; Catrina spoke of praying when she needed to employ someone; Quentin was very clear that as a farmer he was dependent on God for the harvest. Charles thought that, looking back, God had 'kept me out of bother a bit', seeing God's presence in hindsight, guiding him both during university life and in his career. There was also the sense of 'giving in'. We might think of 'relying' and 'depending' as passive processes, but there is also the active sense of giving in, yielding or surrendering to God. Sebastian talked about being moulded like play

dough, saying that he felt he was being pulled out of shape by God and at first resisting it, but then giving in and finding that he didn't fall apart. In a similar way, Izzy talked about arguing with God before capitulating:

I don't **think** I would have come to, ... conclusions, the same conclusions maybe [without prayer]. Often I kind of think, yeah, that, ... I kind of argue. Sometimes you don't, well I think when I'm praying, I don't always want (*laughs*) to always, .. I **know** what the answer is, should be and I'm not always open to it, because I don't actually **want** that answer. You know, sometimes I even **avoid** praying, because I know what the right thing is, but I'm maybe not **ready** for it yet. I'm still narked²⁸⁷ about something (*giggles*) or, you know. I'm just not ready to deal with, ... a situation.

Kate spoke of her petitionary prayer in this way: 'I speak to him [God] as if I'm speaking to a neighbour. You know, it's your will what happens, but I would like **this** to happen.' Later on, she explained: 'I can honestly say, at least seven times out of ten, over the following few days or weeks, he works it out for me, in **his way**.'

Una, another Christian with a long experience of church across more than one denomination, spoke of asking herself whether she could cope with particular situations, and of 'passing things on' to God when she felt she could not deal with things single-handedly. This did not absolve her of a responsibility to act, but she also felt supported by believing that God was involved in it too: 'You've got to sort of, change the things you can change to sort the problem out. I think that's important as well. But I think a lot of it, you reach a point where you say, "Well, I can't do any more than this now."'

Making more space and time for God and prayer was another active way in which people yielded more of themselves. Annie described a significant change to her spiritual practice after sharing in the course. She had always had a conversational

²⁸⁷ Dialect word meaning 'annoyed'.

relationship with God, she would pray ‘sitting on a bus, in a crowd’, she felt there were ‘no taboo places’. Afterwards, although this practice continued, she made time to do something else as well:

Though I still do that **all the time**, I’m actually making additional sort of quiet spaces, um, which isn’t always **easy** when you’ve got a houseful like ours. But **I am managing** actually, even if it’s just 10 minutes, to just **be quiet, on my own**, um, with God. ... I don’t do anything other than just sit. Sit and ... wait, I suppose. I don’t quite know what I’m waiting for, but I just know that I have to sit and wait.

There was an immense sense of emotional power behind these words, and other women in the study also spoke about spending more time just sitting and being with God, in wordless prayer. This turn to the apophatic was less pronounced in the men; they were more likely to talk about questioning God and exploring concepts and ideas about God, but they seemed to be moving towards the same conclusions as the women, that a more radical trust in God was being expected of them.

In response to the question about control, there was actually a surprising amount of unanimity between women and men. Most people who had some length of experience in the faith had an increasing sense of not being in control of events, or of actively handing over control of their lives in some way to God. When asked who was in control in his life, Sebastian joked, ‘Well, it ain’t me!’ He went on to say:

It’d be nice to sort of just sit here and say glibly, “Well, of course, it’s God.” That’s a simplistic, straightforward, easy answer. But I think the God I feel I know isn’t a controlling God in that sense, he’s a guiding and advising God. ... It’s almost as though there’s nobody in control and what God is saying is, ‘Look, it’s not a temperature gauge. Stop trying to turn it down to 22 degrees, or up to 28, or whatever. Just leave the thermostat alone. Just let things grow, let things develop’ ... and that’s what I feel is happening, it’s more about less control, less structure.

Later on he said, ‘Yeah, trust God. If I can do that, I’ll be all right, things’ll be cool.’

Neal also wanted to explore the idea of God's control: 'This idea of control, I think it's a kind of a difficult one. I think somehow we need to become as attuned as we can to what God wants us to do, and that may often involve self-sacrifice. ... I find it a particularly difficult issue because I like being in control.' Mina had also given this some thought:

I think there's a plan, but we're not, kind of, set on automatic pilot to follow that plan. I think we have our own ability to make decisions, to make the wrong decisions, to lose the way that we should be going. Erm, but there's no, ... I mean, we're not **forced** into, ... It's not automatic. I think there's a way that God would like my way, life to go. But, it doesn't stop me tootling off and wasting years doing something else, before I come back to er, where I should be going, or what I should be doing.

There was only one person who thought that it was inappropriate to give control of one's life over to God. This was Enid, who said:

I don't see that as part of the divine plan. Because I try and act, however many shortcomings I have, ... I try and act in a Christian way, I think that's gift enough really. I don't think I should expect someone else to take control of my life, and **direct** me. I've been given a mind, use it.'

The other women thought that they had learned through life that they were not really in control of it, and expressed a range of views on predestination, with some suspecting that life experiences might be planned in some way, and others saying quite firmly that such a notion made no sense to them. Angela was quite clear on this, and although she took responsibility for her own actions, she also expressed a firm trust in God:

I don't think I believe in predestination, and I think I make the choices, and God's so beyond our understanding that ... you **make** that choice at **that** time and even if it leads to bad things, **God will be with you.**

The practice of prayer

We have already alluded to the importance of the practice of prayer as a shaper of the spiritual life, and we look briefly now at how the participants described their prayer lives and any changes which occurred. Where participants talked about any changes to their practice or style of prayer, they all described something which had become more intimate and informal. No-one spoke of prayer becoming more formal, or of a relationship with God which appeared to become more remote. Wendy, who was still at a fairly early stage in her Christian life, said:

It's a conversation with God. But now it's a conversation with God that can be had in many ways, which I probably didn't think of previously. Previously it was a much more formal process that had to be gone through, whereas now it just feels as though there are lots of ways in which you can have that communication.

Neal looks back over a much longer time spent as a practising Christian and describes his earlier perception of God 'as King' moving to a sense of God as 'friend' and a relationship he characterised as 'pally'. As he did this, he also lamented what he saw as a loss of discipline in his earlier prayer life. Perhaps this sense of loss of structure is a further aspect of yielding control to God, which can make us feel uncertain at times. This would correspond with Goodman's understanding of the path of prayer as a winding and unpredictable road.

For several people, being given permission to pray for themselves had been a crucial factor in opening up their prayer life, and Olwyn said, 'I always felt that you prayed for others, whereas if I'm having a difficult time with making a decision now, I can pray and ask for help in making that decision, which I wouldn't have done before.' Mina spoke of 'learning different ways of listening instead of talking' and George spoke of a sense of moving forward, 'with God alongside'. Una described that

through increased prayer, she was more ‘tuned in’ to God and therefore more likely to receive ‘instructions, guidance and answers.’ And Annie spoke very movingly of coming to a greater sense of self-esteem through knowing it was acceptable to pray for herself: ‘I’ve actually started being kinder to myself because I’ve realised as we’ve been going along, that it’s actually **okay** ... for me to pray for me.’

Mapping the process of change – summing up

From the large amount of interview data gathered and analysed, it has been possible to identify a number of factors which appear to contribute to changes in the spiritual life, which participants felt were for the better, even though these changes were sometimes achieved through struggle and questioning. In particular Sebastian and Wendy both spoke of the course increasing their questioning of their faith; Wendy spoke of ‘being confused, but pleasantly confused’ and of feeling ‘comfortable’ about it. Sebastian described feeling angry that he had been asked to venture beyond his ‘comfort zone’ but was also able to acknowledge that through that experience he had grown hugely. As a newer Christian, his growth was quite marked over the six months of the practical research phase, and there was a very clear increase in his ability to speak coherently about his spiritual life. One noticeable effect of the course was to give people greater fluency in the language of spirituality. This helped them to interpret their experience so that it became intelligible to others. It also gave them frameworks and points of reference within the tradition, so that they might communicate their faith to others and also draw strength for themselves knowing that other people have trodden the same path before them, and that they are understood and accepted. For some people, particularly the men, this meant exploring more deeply some systematic theology. In his second interview, Neal said, ‘Almost what I

see is that **prayer** enables God to intervene, ... more than he otherwise would be able to.’ He was not sure how that might happen, and was not sure if it would be considered heretical, but it was clearly something which had caught his attention. He went with this train of thought at some length:

If you think of us as sort of torches, we need to have our batteries charged up with godliness, in order to shine our light brighter.We’re like little lights in the darkness, and by praying, we become particularly bright in particular situations.

Charles was also concerned with the content of his belief and was particularly keen to reconcile his acceptance of the theory of evolution and what he saw as the cruelty of the natural world with his belief in a loving and merciful God. Women spoke in less doctrinal terms, although many of them wondered about how much, if any, of life might be planned, which we might term as grappling with the doctrine of predestination.

Through prayer, people reported a greater sense of integration in their spirituality. People often described putting things together for the first time, especially the idea of incorporating the bible into prayer which seemed to come as a revelation for many participants, even some of long standing as Christians. This came as a surprise to me and made me wonder what it is in Anglican worship which makes people think in such compartmentalized ways? It was particularly noticeable that the sessions which people generally found most helpful were the ones most rooted in the Ignatian tradition, particularly the bible meditation and the practice of examen.²⁸⁸ George Aschenbrenner has suggested that this is because, as we persevere in following the techniques and practices of Ignatian prayer, as we more and more encounter the

²⁸⁸ A structured daily or regular practice of reflecting upon the events of the day and looking for the presence of God within them, which has been described above on pp.70-71.

reality of Christ, so we are increasingly transformed. ‘Through contemplation we truly become whom we contemplate and whom we are all meant to be.’²⁸⁹ He goes on to say that this practice of Ignatian contemplation is ‘primarily a companionship in love’ and thus an end in itself, but that it is also ‘a means to special apostolic presence in the world,’ that is to say, the person who prays is first drawn into a deeper love of God, and then drawn out into greater service of God in the world.²⁹⁰ This seems to correspond with the pattern that emerged during the prayer course; generally people moved from concern with self, through greater self-awareness and self-acceptance, to a greater concern for others.

When most, or all, of the external and internal factors outlined above came together, change in the participants was characterised by increasing surrender and reflexivity; that is, people were both increasingly willing to submit themselves to God and more enabled to reflect on and take responsibility for their own actions. Annie spoke about recognising her own tendency to be ‘a control freak’ and finding some liberation from it, both in willingness to accept God’s involvement in her life and in greater freedom to recognise that sometimes others might be right, as well as her. There was also an increased ability to see how one’s own actions impacted upon others. Sebastian commented:

If it [the course] has changed me, what impact has it had on those closest to me? Because whilst it might be very good for **me**, it might be very difficult, or shocking or uncomfortable for them, and so, to recognise that the changes that I bring in me shouldn't be things that become foisted or forced upon other people through any kind of dogma or you know, domineering type process.

²⁸⁹ Aschenbrenner, George, ‘becoming Whom We Contemplate’, p.42.

²⁹⁰ Aschenbrenner, George, ‘becoming Whom We Contemplate’, p.39.

For some, particularly some of the women, this process was also bound up with an increase in self-esteem. Effie said, 'I started this course and I said that I didn't like myself very much, and I think I've come to accept me more, as I am.' We should be careful of gender stereotyping here though, as Sebastian also spoke about himself in these ways. For others, particularly those who had been Christians for a shorter length of time, there was a clear sense of coming to greater self-awareness. Frankie said about one of the sermons,

This was interesting, cos this was asking you about things that , um, distracted you away from God, and I've written down, 'Material things, do we really need them', with a question mark. ... I never **thought** I was materialistic until I listened to that, and then I started thinking, 'Mmm, maybe I am.'

In every participant there was some awareness of change. Even those who thought they had changed very little actually showed quite a deal of change when their first and second interviews were compared. For no-one was there a sense of reaching a goal, and this was never suggested as a possibility either in the course or the sermons. Rather there was a sense of being prepared to continue on a journey with God, and for most, a sense of being more willing to embrace that journey. Sebastian has the final word here:

About me personally, how well do I know myself? I feel I've uncovered certain things that I would never have uncovered if I hadn't come to God, or however that transpired, and I feel that I'm sure there are going to be other things uncovered in the fullness of time.

Revisiting the research field

There was a two-pronged process of reflection on the practical research. This was not planned originally but was fortuitously offered by the circumstances of my move to another post. The first reflection was soon after the second interview, as

participants were given a detailed feedback sheet which they were asked to fill in and send back anonymously. The intention of this was to draw out comments which people might not have felt comfortable saying in person. Shortly after this, an opportunity arose to take another post which meant a geographical move and there were some benefits as well as drawbacks to this in research terms. Although I had to defer my studies for a year, the emotional distance from the original context gave me greater objectivity and time to reflect. Talal Asad, writing in 1986, holds the view that 'It remains the case that the ethnographer's translation/representation of a particular culture is inevitably a textual construct, that as representation it cannot normally be contexted by the people to whom it is attributed.'²⁹¹ If we accept this view of ethnography, we would largely be ruling out the possibility of effective auto-ethnography, but more recent writing in the social sciences asserts that it is possible.²⁹² Speaking from my own experience in this work, I found the extra distance offered by my move beneficial, but I can only hypothesise as to how the work might have continued had I remained in the same context.

I was able to reconvene the participants two years later, in June 2010, to ask them whether any changes had been long-lasting. This added to the process of triangulation and strengthened the reliability of the findings. The paucity of longitudinal research into spirituality has already been mentioned, but this reunion of participants at a distance of two years brought some interesting observations and I was able to test out my interim findings. I was surprised and pleased that so many things had 'stuck' with participants and there was a palpable sense of their having

²⁹¹ Asad, Talal, 'The Concept of Cultural Translation,' in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, ed. James Clifford and George E. Marcus (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1986), p.163.

²⁹² See the detailed discussion of auto-ethnography in Chapter 4; section entitled 'Reflections on the researcher experience.'

shared in something that was significant to them, even though they did not all know each other particularly well.²⁹³ There was also a clear sense of the strength of their relationships with me as both priest and researcher, despite the two year gap. Marion Goldman comments that 'Ethnography involves implicit alliances between the researcher and those she interviews' and this is something that needs to be acknowledged and well-handled by priests who also want to do research.²⁹⁴

Turning to the evidence from the anonymous response papers and the feedback after two years, it is encouraging to note that the research findings are largely supported. Following the second interview, people were asked to reflect on each group session or sermon, with a particular emphasis on what had been helpful or unhelpful and to write their responses down. There was a close correlation between what they were conscious of as helpful and what had emerged through the interviews. The beneficial factors identified most regularly by many of the participants were: the group context; learning (from others and from a guide); having their experience validated; realisation; growth in self-acceptance and self-awareness; growth in trust in and reliance on God (elsewhere termed 'surrender'); the opportunity for spiritual experience and prayer and challenges to their existing thinking.

At the two year stage, I gave a short presentation of what I had observed thus far, and asked them if they recognised these interim results as being true to their experience.

They agreed that there was a process whereby people grew spiritually and

²⁹³ This was the only time that all the participants were invited to meet together: the sermon series participants had never met as a group, and as more than one church was involved, there was a diversity of types of relationship. Participants might be close friends with some of the full group, yet hardly knowing others at all.

²⁹⁴ Goldman, 'Voicing Spiritualities: Anchored Composites as an Approach to Understanding Religious Commitment,' p.156.

acknowledged the importance of the bible, older participants attributing this to being taught the bible as children. Some said that the research project had enabled them to make better connections between the bible and their prayer life. The general opinion was that they had enjoyed the course and sermon series very much and agreed that the spiritual life was something which was a source of joy.

There was a discussion of the impact of family upon spirituality, and participants thought that it could be a blend of positive and negative influences, speaking both of helpful formational influences in the past and also about family tensions in the present. In such circumstances, a group could be a real support. The prayer groups were greatly valued and spoken of as a very formative influence, to the extent that some of those who attended the sermon series expressed regret that they had not chosen or been able to do the group work.

The importance of significant life events was also discussed and the impact of them upon the individual's spiritual life became profoundly apparent in the anonymous responses to the written questions. In the group discussion of these events, there was much said that was extremely moving. Many people acknowledged that it was in hard times that their faith had grown or changed most, though no-one wrote the word 'suffering' itself. Sebastian began to speak about the meaning of pain and suffering, and talked about God being alongside us in it all. As one of the most recent 'converts', I had already observed a huge change in his level of articulacy in his faith between the first and second interviews. Richard, one of the more mature Christians said this was the best articulation of the meaning of suffering that he had heard in a

long time.²⁹⁵ Others agreed. I was aware that there had been further significant trauma for at least two of the participants since the research phase – one of the participants had lost a child to suicide and another had undergone treatment for cancer and was now struggling with faith and church involvement. This moment was a very emotional one for the whole group and there was an acceptance of the reality of spiritual experience of God – direct and unmediated, sometimes so recognised and sometimes not.

We have already alluded to Paul Wink's research and it is worth noting at this point his assertion that 'relatively few people experience radical religious transformations in adulthood indicative of conversions or apostasy' and that this high level of stability in religiousness across the lifespan is important 'because it challenges the view that individuals tend to experience radical changes in religiousness in response to negative or positive life experiences'.²⁹⁶ The project to which Wink refers is one of the very few which offers any longitudinal research into spirituality and therefore its findings are valuable and not necessarily in conflict with the findings of this research study. Participants did not describe these 'significant life events' as events which changed the *course* of their faith, but as experiences which, with hindsight, seemed to strengthen their faith and draw them deeper into relationship with God. Perhaps it is the case that suffering can be beneficially transformative to the extent that we permit God to enter into it and share it with us?

²⁹⁵ Interestingly, we can note here an instance of a man giving individual support and encouragement to another man in a way which is generally described as characteristic of the way women support each other.

²⁹⁶ Wink, 'Religious and Spiritual Development in Adulthood,' p.449.

There was a general feeling that people had either come to the course wanting to know more about their own relationship with God, or wanting to find out in some way whether they were 'getting prayer right'. Some wanted to compare their practice with others. They had discovered something more than that – a sense of the group becoming something important in terms of shared experience. It was possible to identify a tension between their original idea of the spiritual life as a private and personal thing and the value of the corporate experience which was referred to a great deal both in the second interview and in this later feedback session. The group was valued and described as a 'place of safety' and place where you knew people were 'coming from the same place' i.e. people who also believed in God. The group was also a place to make sense of things when other family settings were not working. There was an acceptance that several had come to focus on their own personal relationships with God, or 'to see how other people pray'/'to see if I am doing it right', but that what had happened had spilled over into mutuality and that the group itself had been a positive experience.

There was further evidence in this session itself of the power of sharing spirituality. Even though this was the first time that all the participants had come together, in the space of an hour, barriers came down because they had shared a common experience. As time went on, they spoke more freely and in the end we overran the allotted time as there was so much they wanted to say. Even the two people who had said nothing at all in the original prayer course felt able to make contributions. Perhaps this was a re-entry into a 'safe place' with a 'safe person' after a gap of over two years? It was certainly a moving testimony to the strength of relationships built up through the sharing of prayer and personal experience, and another example of the power of

people being 'heard into speech.'²⁹⁷ As Crain and Seymour have said, 'Research itself is an activity of empowerment, of opening to view meanings and providing occasions where people can transform living.'²⁹⁸

Summary

What factors shaped spiritual growth?

Listening to people talk about their spiritual lives, and spending a great deal of time hearing back and reflecting on their words led me to two major conclusions. First, very many 'ordinary' people in everyday congregations have spiritual experiences and lead rich, prayer-filled lives which are usually hidden from view. These spiritual experiences and lives of prayer are the wellsprings from which they draw strength and which keep them going during times of adversity, loss and trauma. Second, people *can grow* in their spiritual lives, given encouragement, openness and a safe space in which to explore new thinking and experiences. As a Christian, with my own assumptions and personal spiritual experiences, I suggest that God is the primary agent of change, and what we do spiritually as humans is in response to God's initiative. I consider that God is not coercive but waits for our openness, creating in us a sense of longing and need. Those with a belief in God can both grow to cooperate in this, and can help others to do so. Perhaps the first step is to acknowledge that there *can be a process of change*, of deepening relationship with God. It should be made clear at this point that this sense of process does not imply hierarchical or stage change in the systematic way described by James Fowler, nor

²⁹⁷ Morton, Nelle, *The Journey Is Home* (Boston: Beacon P., 1985), p.128.

²⁹⁸ Crain and Seymour, 'The Ethnographer as Minister: Ethnographic Research in Ministry,' p.304.

are value judgments implied, in that being more spiritually mature would mean one was 'better' or superior in some way. A better analogy might be to liken the growth of the spiritual relationship with God to that of the human relationship characterised by love. As human beings we tend not to think that different types of loving relationships can be arranged hierarchically, but that love is an absolute quality which may deepen and mature in certain ways across the lifespan, in response to the events of our lives.

There has been little longitudinal research into spirituality and it is a challenge to build theory on a research project which had less than a year's fieldwork, but I want to make some tentative suggestions here which I explore more fully in the concluding chapter. When most or all of the factors outlined above are present, spiritual growth is characterised by increasing surrender and reflexivity. Two key outcomes can be identified; the process of surrender becomes more pronounced, that is, people 'give in' to or rely on God more readily and also, people become increasingly reflexive, able to reflect upon experience and integrate it. In this process of increasing reflexivity, which we might also describe as growth in self-awareness, people appear to become less dependent on the external structures which may have supported earlier growth, like validation and safe spaces and become more able to sustain their faith internally. This resembles the process of self-actualisation described by psychology, but with the important distinction that for those who practise their faith in this way, their internal strength is derived from a relationship with a transcendent other which the Christian faith describes as God.

What claims am I making?

My data are the fruit of a lengthy and embedded involvement with a group of Anglican parishes, and specifically in a project to encourage spiritual growth in that setting. The resulting findings and analysis give an in-depth look at how and why people pray, what they understand might be happening, if anything, when they pray, and how people changed in response to a piece of structured spiritual input. My research shows that even small interventions by clergy/congregational leaders can be instrumental in helping people to develop a deeper spiritual life; that there is a value in encouraging corporate spiritual reflection and prayer, and that there is beneficial movement and change when such things are done. A feature of this spiritual change is towards greater 'surrender' to God which is often shaped by significant life experiences, and facilitated both by affirmation and validation offered by a spiritual guide and the opportunity to share experiences with others in a safe space. I think my data and findings indicate that Church of England clergy might consider spending more time and effort in encouraging spiritual growth amongst existing church-goers, thereby better equipping and enabling the laity to focus on programmes of outreach, mission and discipleship. Parishioners need to know that their spiritual experiences are both valid and real and clergy should provide opportunities for this to happen, and also model the spiritual journey for them. The whole process of this piece of research has been a spiritual journey for me, much of it being realised in reflection as well as during the research itself. It has been a mixture of commitment to the encouragement of spiritual growth in churchgoers; an increasing awareness of the reality and value of corporate spirituality and struggles to achieve something worthwhile in the midst of the messiness of day-to-day parish life and the demands of a worried church. I hope that my struggle with this small piece

of work in a parochial corner of the north of England may have some validity beyond its immediate context.

Chapter 6 – Conclusion

'Spirituality cannot be studied without being practised.'

*Marie McCarthy*²⁹⁹

In her 1982 book, *The Journey is Home*, Nelle Morton talks about what she calls 'hearing to speech'. The book clearly bears the hallmarks of its 1980s feminism, but her observation is more broadly applicable in the sphere of spirituality. This research project has shown that the respectful and space-giving hearing of others, both women and men, is crucially important in fostering spiritual growth. 'Hearing of this sort is equivalent to empowerment. We empower one another by hearing the other to speech.'³⁰⁰ In the case of the private and often silent world of spiritual experience, the notion of being heard into speech is something that can usefully enrich all our lives.³⁰¹ Morton describes God as 'the hearing one – hearing us to our own responsible word.'³⁰² Although she is speaking here of women taking responsibility for themselves, there is much of value to be derived from this view of God's initiative and our response as human beings, who can make the choice to both take responsibility for ourselves and paradoxically also choose whether or not to 'give in' and make space for God in our lives.

²⁹⁹ McCarthy, 'Spirituality in a Postmodern Era,' p.204.

³⁰⁰ Morton, *The Journey Is Home*, p.128.

³⁰¹ Morton identifies the importance of women being 'heard into speech', and as someone who became an adult during the seventies, a decade which saw the rise of feminism as 'women's liberation' and who still struggles with discrimination against women in the Church of England, I would be the last person to want to underplay the importance of women's voices being heard.

³⁰² Morton, *The Journey is Home*, p.129.

The original contribution of this research project

I propose three things here: a model of spiritual maturity and a corporate praxis for encouraging spiritual growth that has been empirically tested; the value of Ignatian practice in the Anglican parish setting and that surrender is an important aspect of spiritual growth towards maturity which is overlooked by secular psychological models of human maturing yet is a key aspect of mature spirituality in the Christian context.

Building theory - a model of growth

I have already outlined how my findings indicated patterns of change, and derived from them factors which, when present, might foster beneficial change in the spiritual life. Can praxis be developed from this which might encourage spiritual growth and which can be used effectively by parish clergy?

First, a summary of the points substantiated in the previous chapter:

- Spiritual experience is real and something that happens to ‘ordinary Christians.’
- Spiritual development is possible
- Personal prayer contributes to change and growth
- External change factors are: validation; safe space; significant life events and the bible
- Internal change factors are: realisation; learning; surrender; the practice of prayer

- When most or all of these factors are present, spiritual maturing is characterised by increasing surrender to God and reflexivity.

From these findings, I suggest that repeating and developing the work I did in *Exploring Prayer* would help parishes to grow spiritually and to take on increasingly more of the characteristics of mature faith, delineated in Chapter 3, enabling them to play a fuller part in the church's mission. Suggestions of how this might be done appear below under ministerial outcomes.

The use of Ignatian practice in a group context

It became apparent to me as the prayer course progressed that the sessions based on Ignatian practice were the best received by most people. This influenced the choice of material for the sermon series, which was planned to include an Ignatian meditation. In the analysis phase, of the spiritual input offered, Ignatian practice was most effective as a catalyst for change, which led me to ask what were the correspondences between the change factors I identified and Ignatian practice itself? Having identified validation, safe space; significant life events and the bible as key external factors for change, we might consider how these results map onto Ignatian theology. There are some striking parallels. In Ignatian practice, validation is offered by the spiritual guide, who also provides a safe space for encounter with God and for reflecting on spiritual experience, by being a non-judgmental companion. The retreat giver, or the spiritual director, in the Ignatian tradition, effectively says to the retreatant, 'The divine-human encounter is something which is real, and possible, and I am going to help and support you in this moment.' Such validation and safe

spaces, I contend, can be offered in the Anglican parish setting, with a little care, willingness and preparation. Similarly, the internal factor of realisation, which I identified as an important factor in spiritual growth, is reflected in the nature of the *Exercises* themselves, which seek to facilitate the divine-human encounter through biblically-based meditations and specific prayer practices. The notion of surrender, of yielding to God is something which finds its parallel in Ignatian practice and is particularly focussed in the *Suscipe* prayer of Ignatius.³⁰³ Therefore, if I have correctly identified factors which encourage spiritual growth in the parish context, then there are solid reasons for Ignatian practice to be a significant part of the ‘toolkit’ used to nurture the development of faith.

We must also consider the validity of using Ignatian spirituality in group settings. Originally Ignatius’ *Exercises* were for the individual and this continues strongly today in individually guided retreats. However, the last decade has seen a growth in the use of Ignatian practice with groups. Perhaps this is an aspect of the way the living tradition of Ignatian spirituality ‘accommodates’ itself in changing contexts?³⁰⁴ Whilst we need to be careful not to distort Ignatian teaching, we should also take inspiration from its flexibility. David Lonsdale points out that the Ignatian approach has ‘breadth of appeal because ... it goes beyond divisions of lay, cleric and religious to address the human person in his or her fundamental relationships with God, *other people* and the created world.’³⁰⁵ When we use Ignatian practice in a group setting, we must be mindful of those individual relationships, as well as the corporate

³⁰³ This prayer has already been quoted in Chapter 3, in the section: *Ignatius’ understanding of spiritual maturity*.

See Fleming, *Draw Me into Your Friendship: The Spiritual Exercises, a Literal Translation and a Contemporary Reading*, p.177.

³⁰⁴ Ronald Modras’ description of the ‘attitude of accommodation’ he finds in Ignatian practice was referred to in Chapter 3.

³⁰⁵ Lonsdale, *Eyes to See, Ears to Hear: An Introduction to Ignatian Spirituality*, p.193, italics mine.

relationship. We should also ensure that those using Ignatian spiritual practices in group settings should themselves be well-informed and skilled in the tradition, otherwise we risk diluting, or even worse, distorting it, to the detriment of others. There are some places where Ignatian practice is used in group settings. Judith Roemer draws on over thirty years' experience of the ISECP group in the US.³⁰⁶ She acknowledges interdependence as part of group practice: 'Both individual contemplation and the group meeting challenges one to deal with one's freedom, God's freedom and the freedom of the others in the group.'³⁰⁷ She writes of how, within groups, using the insights of Ignatian practice, people come to a realisation both of their own freedom to act, their responsibilities and the fact that human life is interdependent, not individualistic. In a recent article on 'paying attention', Julie Lunn points out the rarity of group spiritual work in the UK and says that what there is, is offered to groups who share something in common, - retreatants, clergy, those who opt for spiritual direction. The local church, particularly in the rural area, is far more diverse. In this context, perhaps more than any other, a richly varied group of people come together to practise their faith; in this specific case, a group of people of differing educational and class backgrounds, of widely differing ages, and of both sexes.³⁰⁸ Considering the diversity of such church-based groupings, the flexibility of Ignatian spirituality is ideally suited for use in the parish context.

Maureen Conroy, a church leader working in the Ignatian tradition, says one of the key tasks of ministry is to 'strive to enable individuals to open themselves to the

³⁰⁶ Ignatian Spiritual Exercises for the Corporate Person.

³⁰⁷ Roemer, Judith A., 'A Practice in Group Spirituality: Ignatian Spiritual Exercises for the Corporate Person,' *Human Development* 30, no. 3 (2009), p.41.

³⁰⁸ In terms of ethnicity, all the participants were white British people, which reflected the catchment area, which is almost entirely British and white.

experience of God's overwhelming love for them.³⁰⁹ Speaking of the interior experiencing of God, she avers that this experience fosters change. She delineates the process as: experiencing God; deepening the relationship with God; knowledge of God moving from head to heart, conversion of 'heart, mind, attitude and behaviour'; developing discernment; making life-giving choices and celebrating God's love 'in a visible, concrete way'.³¹⁰ She suggests various ways to nurture people's spiritual experience, significantly to encourage people 'to be part of a faith-sharing group in which they can truly be themselves in their vulnerability and their strength.'³¹¹ Likewise, Julie Lunn asserts, 'the corporate nature of group direction and practical theology offers an important corrective to any tendency towards self-absorbed individualism.'³¹² It was apparent at the outset of this research that people began their involvement with the intention of learning something for themselves, and exploring more *about themselves*. However, through the corporate nature of the work, they moved from seeing each other as a collection of experiences from which they could learn, to building a micro-community which cared for each other. We might say that they moved from 'self-absorbed individualism' outwards into pastoral care for others. I myself moved from a preoccupation with individual spiritual growth to a greater appreciation of the value of the group and the nature of corporate spirituality. The participants found immense value in the group experience of prayer, rooted in Ignatian practice. This was amply illustrated in chapter 5 and I commend such small group work to the Church of England for further consideration.

³⁰⁹ Conroy, Maureen, 'Nurturing Spiritual Experiences,' *Human Development* 24, no. 3 (2003), p.29.

³¹⁰ Conroy, 'Nurturing Spiritual Experiences,' pp.30-31.

³¹¹ Conroy, 'Nurturing Spiritual Experiences,' p.32.

³¹² Lunn, 'Paying Attention: The Task of Attending in Spiritual Direction and Practical Theology,' p.224.

Surrender as an aspect of spiritual maturity

Surrender is an aspect of my model of maturity which requires serious consideration, because it was borne out by the findings and because it is a point of difference with secular psychological models of mature human behaviour. In Chapter 3, Mark McIntosh and Sarah Coakley's understandings of human yielding to God were closely examined and it was decided that surrender was to do with freely choosing God, and choosing to serve God.³¹³ Ross Thompson speaks of obedience as 'a choice to respond to God's choice of us.'³¹⁴ This willed surrender is not a childlike dependency, nor is it to do with elitism, or hierarchy, or power, or the valuing of one person above another. Rather it is to do with a continuous process of human becoming. I use the continuous verb form because I agree with Saffiotti, who says: 'We are never totally finished with the process of becoming more alive, more integrated and more whole.'³¹⁵

Her model of becoming includes something which matches what I have characterised as surrender; she speaks of 'following Jesus - letting him lead and *accepting to go where he leads*.'³¹⁶ She continues, 'Difficult as it is for us, the invitation is to learn to love as Jesus loved, with insight, compassion, sensitivity, justice and self-surrender.'³¹⁷ She suggests that we can cultivate ways of moving toward maturity ourselves and points out that 'growth into both spiritual and psychological maturity

³¹³ McIntosh speaks elsewhere about what he terms 'obedience': describing the universe as obedient to God in a way which only reveals itself when we give sufficient attention. See McIntosh, Mark A., *Discernment and Truth: The Spirituality and Theology of Knowledge* (New York: Crossroad, 2004), p.206.

³¹⁴ Thompson and Williams, *Christian Spirituality*, p.82.

³¹⁵ Saffiotti, Luisa M., 'Fostering/Hindering Christian Maturity,' *Human Development* 26, no. 3 (2005), p.30.

³¹⁶ Saffiotti, 'Fostering/Hindering Christian Maturity,' p.31, italics mine.

³¹⁷ Saffiotti, 'Fostering/Hindering Christian Maturity,' p.33.

always is connected to painful processes of "purification".³¹⁸ I concur that what I have termed 'significant life events' may be key moments for spiritual growth, or the process of purification in Saffiotti's terms. This is also why I resist seeing growth as linear, in Fowler's terms, as I suspect that these life events make growth more haphazard, and that times of questioning and transition may bring regressions before greater maturity. Zagano and Gillespie remind us that Christians must 'remain open to the paradox of Christ's message, to the claim that the surrender of personal fulfilment proves to be the truest teleology.'³¹⁹ I suggest that surrender enables us to mature in faith because, by continuing to respond to God's choice of us in the affirmative, saying 'yes' to God, the way is continually being opened for God to fulfil potential in us.

Before moving to consider ministerial outcomes of this research, it is important to ask whether the model of spiritual maturity put forward in Chapter 3 was a valid one in view of the research findings. The twelve criteria for assessing spiritual maturity were suggested to be: a sense of interdependence; compassionate loving resulting in loving action; seeing the world through God's eyes; self-knowledge; practising forgiveness, resolving conflicts and mediating peaceful relationships; reflexivity; self esteem through the awareness of God's undeserved love; sense of surrender to God's will; loss of self-importance; ability to cope with complexity, doubt and failure; a sense of life being integrated into God's purpose and learning to find God in all things. Undoubtedly a sense of interdependence grew through the research period as the participants moved from a very individualistic outlook to an appreciation of the group experience. As the course was largely reflective in nature it was harder to

³¹⁸ Saffiotti, 'Fostering/Hindering Christian Maturity,' p.32.

³¹⁹ Zagano and Gillespie, 'Ignatian Spirituality and Positive Psychology,' p.58.

assess people's actions beyond its confines, but as the parish priest I was aware of the increasing nature of some people's involvement in action which served others, in voluntary work both within and beyond the church and an increasing engagement with the worshipping life of the church. There was a corresponding emphasis in people's discourse on the nature of appropriate Christian behaviour. Seeing the world through God's eyes, or Ignatian detachment from the things of the world, is hard to assess in a short time frame, but I think at this point of Frankie's realisation that she had perhaps been materialistic as evidence of this type of growth.

Growth in self-knowledge was well-evidenced throughout the study, and there was a growing understanding of the importance of forgiveness and conflict resolution. The change in the ability to be reflexive was most marked in those who were newest to faith; those who had been Christians for a long time were more habitually reflexive, but even some well-established Christians showed an increased ability to look honestly at themselves. For several of them, this went hand-in-hand with increased self-esteem through a fuller realisation of God's love for them. Although I had hypothesised that surrender was an important aspect of spiritual growth, I was surprised by how clearly this emerged, at all stages of the life of faith, becoming more and more marked as people persisted in their spiritual journey. Those who had been practising Christians the longest showed the most sophisticated abilities to cope with doubt, complexity and failure and many had dealt with very serious challenges to faith which had not derailed their belief in God. The sense of integration into God's purpose and the ability to find God in all things are perhaps the hallmarks of the most spiritually mature Christian and the most difficult to assess and evidence. Perhaps these are states which come and go, depending upon our life experiences,

but there is also a sense that certain levels of prayer, once experienced, leave an indelible impression and a certain knowledge of being held safe in God's love and this affects our being and behaviour in a permanent way.³²⁰ There were signs of this in some of the participants, especially those who had experienced a great deal of suffering. Overall, the model proved to be a useful and accurate indicator of the shape of human spiritual maturity, although I acknowledge that it might be critiqued for not dealing more clearly with justice issues and risk-taking. These were subsumed into compassionate action but perhaps needed greater emphasis.

Ministerial outcomes

Belden Lane suggests that writers in spirituality 'must dance lightly and then leave. After all, it is not about them'.³²¹ This research project will have meaning if it contributes to evolving practice in spirituality in church congregations. Lane sketches the possibility of texts being 'performative': 'Readers complete, in their experience of performative reading, what the voice ... of the author had only begin to suggest.'³²² This section makes some suggestions for a renewed praxis in the church and asks how we make meaning of what has been uncovered?

Magolda and Weems remind us that:

One of the foundational assumptions within qualitative inquiry is that meaning is socially constructed; in fact this is the (one of the) reasons that researchers engage in qualitative inquiry – to gain insight into how people

³²⁰ See also Goodman's diagram of the Path of Prayer on p. 90 – the Prayer of Union.

³²¹ Lane, Belden C., 'Writing in Spirituality as a Self-Implicating Act: Reflections on Authorial Disclosure and the Hiddenness of the Self.,' in *Exploring Christian Spirituality: Essays in Honor of Sandra M. Schneiders Ihm*, ed. Bruce H. Lescher and Elizabeth Liebert (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2006), p.53.

³²² Lane, *Writing in Spirituality as a Self-Implicating Act*, p.66.

construct meaning of their experiences. But the theoretical perspectives that guide interpretive inquiry also remind us that meaning is constructed not just by the individual in a vacuum; they are embedded and influenced by interpersonal, institutional, community and societal frames of meaning.³²³

Although the participants in my study were part of a church congregation, the research revealed that most spiritual experience was intensely private. If Magolda and Weems are right, then what 'frames of meaning' were participants using for their spiritual experiences? If people are not 'heard into speech' in some way, how can spiritual wisdom be shared? If congregational leaders do not address the spiritual journey directly and frequently, how might people construct frames of meaning within which to locate commonly occurring spiritual experiences?

It would be easy at this point to castigate parish priests and other congregational leaders for failing to do this adequately, but Loughlan Sofield makes a telling point: 'Priests are frequently only affirmed for what they do.'³²⁴ As a result, they respond by doing more of the tasks for which they are affirmed, frequently resulting in despondent, workaholic priests.' He concludes that the church needs to affirm priests for what they are, not just what they do.³²⁵ It is not my intention to criticise existing congregational leadership, but to encourage greater reflexivity in parish clergy with regard to their own spiritual development, and their attention to the spiritual development of those for whom they share the 'cure of souls.' Lunn suggests that 'in giving attention to each human story, ... we incarnate God's attention to humanity.'³²⁶ She concludes: 'Whenever people are given attention, it has an effect. Paying

³²³ Magolda, 'Doing Harm: An Unintended Consequence of Qualitative Inquiry?', p.503.

³²⁴ This is frequently done within the Church of England by counting congregation sizes, focussing on priest-led 'mission activity' and assessing parishes' ability to pay their share of the Diocesan budget. Whilst these things are important, over-emphasis on them tends to de-emphasise the importance of spiritual nurture.

³²⁵ Sofield, 'Developing Christian Maturity in Our Pluralistic Society,' p.8.

³²⁶ Lunn, 'Paying Attention: The Task of Attending in Spiritual Direction and Practical Theology,' p.223.

attention gives worth. It establishes humanity, reasserts dignity and affirms the ultimate value of our personhood and our being.³²⁷ The truth of this emerged very clearly in the feedback session two years later, that people felt themselves valued and heard and this had made a positive contribution to their faith journey.

Implications for future ministerial practice

So, what might we do differently? First, we need to pay attention to where we are in our own spiritual life and ensure they we have not become desiccated and exhausted. The pressure to perform in many areas tends to squeeze clergy's own spiritual lives; McCarthy's injunction might be timely, that it is only 'to the extent that we as theologians reclaim and live out of our spiritual centre we become reliable guides for others.'³²⁸ Parish clergy and congregational leaders need *more* support in maintaining the ability to live out of their spiritual centres, especially in the face of dwindling clergy numbers and increasingly diverse patterns of ministerial commitment. This is very easy to say and extremely challenging to put into practice and clergy need the support, encouragement and affirmation of their denominational structures to maintain the spiritual centre of ministry.

Next, where can the change factors identified earlier be put into practice? Validation comes through paying attention to the spiritual lives of those amongst whom we minister, giving reassurance that there are many ways in which to encounter God and that to have spiritual experiences is a normal part of the life of faith, not something to

³²⁷ Lunn, 'Paying Attention: The Task of Attending in Spiritual Direction and Practical Theology', p.228.

³²⁸ McCarthy, 'Spirituality in a Postmodern Era,' p.204.

cause worry or anxiety. The practicalities will vary with the parish context, but obvious opportunities are: weaving spiritual teaching into sermons; offering teaching on different spiritual traditions, both historical and contemporary; running courses about prayer and spirituality which are both informative and experiential and encouraging the formation of small groups where corporate prayer might be explored and spiritual experience discussed. In these ways, we validate people's experiences and help them recognise their authenticity.

I cannot overemphasise the importance of the giving of 'safe space', especially to those who are beginning the spiritual journey. People need assurance that they will not be mocked, judged or dismissed when they find a way to speak about their experience of God, or of experiences which they may not yet have been able to name, locate and understand. Leaders should set clear boundaries for group work; maintain confidentiality within groups, model appropriate and respectful leadership skills and ensure that anyone to whom they delegate leadership is both trained and supervised. This may mean training in listening skills for themselves and others. Knowledge about adult learning styles; personality theory and group dynamics may need to be extended, as all appear to be significant influences on spiritual development. In this project, two modes of involvement were offered, to accommodate different personalities. Were I to repeat the course, I would offer an increased diversity of methods of engagement with the material. I would suggest that we pay sensitive attention to the issue of gender, employing a hermeneutic of suspicion, not accepting gender stereotyping unquestioningly, but committing ourselves to be better informed of the ongoing discourse. Of the varying understandings of the impact of gender, Simon Baron-Cohen's work on brain gender

best fits my research results, as it helps us to understand that brain gender does not map directly onto sex differences, that many people have a ‘balanced brain’ with a blend of empathic and systemising propensities, therefore discouraging us from a too-rapid stereotyping of women and men.

The church has long been aware that events like births, bereavements, marriage and divorce are key times when people’s faith shifts, dislocates or re-aligns. This research suggests that supporting people through trauma and giving them space to question and lament without offering glib answers will assist the growth of faith, though there may be a significant time-lag between the event and moving into a deeper faith. Clergy and congregational leaders need sensitivity, patience and perseverance at such times and may require further training and support to understand these processes, beyond that which is given during initial ministerial education.

We should not underestimate the role that the Bible plays in the formation of faith, and ensure that it is well taught and carefully used in liturgy and teaching contexts. I have noted how hungry people were simply to know more about God and spiritual experience, and the importance of teaching about spirituality, as well as other aspects of Christianity, should not be underestimated. Clergy should also remember that spiritual growth is an inner journey, and people *need time* to ‘realise’ things, to learn about faith, and to put what they are learning into practice in their own spiritual lives. Encouraging the practice of personal prayer, modelling it and giving opportunities for it are crucial ways in which spiritual maturity can be encouraged.

If clergy are to spend more time doing these things, then clearly they will spend less time elsewhere. It seems to me that although our society as a whole is interested in what it terms ‘spirituality,’ the Church of England has not effectively proclaimed what has historically been one of Christianity’s major strengths.³²⁹ The emphasis in the last two decades has instead been on numerical church growth, mission and evangelism. It was interesting to note that when the report *Mission-Shaped Church* appeared, it had no mention of spirituality or prayer in the index and the chapter on theology for a missionary church makes no mention of spirituality.³³⁰ A volume devoted to mission-shaped spirituality came later, as if its omission were belatedly realised.³³¹ Most in-service training currently offered to serving clergy emphasises outreach, leadership skills, children’s and youth work and building projects. Insufficient attention is given after ordination to the things I have delineated as important: the history and practice of spiritual traditions; prayer; listening skills and supporting the spiritual journey. It seems that the Church of England thinks that, once ordained, the spiritual life is a private matter for its clergy, in which they need no further support. There are small signs of a concern to resource congregations spiritually; thinking particularly of David Runcorn’s 2008 Grove booklet *The Road to Growth Less Travelled: Spiritual Paths in a Missionary Church*.³³² The title itself indicates that Runcorn considers that spiritual growth is far from the top of the church’s list of priorities yet, if the church is to equip lay people to speak intelligently

³²⁹ Albeit with a much broader frame of reference than the specifically Christian one I have used in this work.

³³⁰ *Mission-Shaped Church: church planting and fresh expressions of church in a changing context*. A report from the working group of the Church of England’s Mission and Public Affairs Council (London: Church House, 2004).

³³¹ Hope, Susan, *Mission-shaped Spirituality: the transforming power of mission* (London: Church House, 2006). Interestingly, this book originated from a single author rather than from a committee.

³³² Runcorn, David, *The Road to Growth Less Travelled: Spiritual Paths in a Missionary Church* (Cambridge, UK: Grove, 2008). See also Runcorn, David, *Spirituality Workbook: A Guide for Explorers, Pilgrims and Seekers* (London: SPCK, 2006).

and compassionately into a society interested in more diverse spiritualities, then we neglect the teaching and support of Christian spirituality at our peril.³³³

And what of the notion of surrender? To quote Kelcourse: 'In anthropological terms, trusting faith is foundational. Without a prior orientation of trust towards God, knowledge of God would be unlikely. Yet, without reflection on experience, basic trust remains static and mute, unable to mature in response to changing circumstances.'³³⁴ Clergy must therefore not only give safe spaces in which people can grow; help them interpret both their experience and hand on the Christian spiritual tradition, they must be watchful for those times where surrendering to God's will is appropriate, both at an individual and at a corporate level. To borrow a phrase from the current Church of England baptism service, 'this is a demanding task for which you will need the help and grace of God.'³³⁵ Clergy may need to receive that help mediated through the structures of the church, as well as through direct reliance on the God in whom they put their trust. I suggest that if the church permits the shift of emphasis outlined above, encouraging clergy to spend more time nurturing spiritual practice and reflection, then the laity would be better equipped and resourced for the task of mission and outreach which is more appropriately theirs. Gorman thinks that 'most of the time we have difficulty bringing persons to maturity in Christ because we have a fuzzy idea of what this means.'³³⁶ I have already given a clear description of what I believe to be the shape of Christian maturity and I suggest that the wisdom of Ignatian spiritual practice, already burgeoning in individual

³³³ See also Helm, Nick, *Soul Spark: A Short Course Exploring Prayer and Spiritual Growth* (Oxford: Grove, 2006).

³³⁴ Kelcourse, Felicity B., ed., *Human Development and Faith* (St. Louis: Chalice, 2004), p.7.

³³⁵ *Common Worship: Initiation Services*, First Edition (London: Church House, 1998).

³³⁶ Gorman, Julie, 'Christian Formation,' *Christian Education Journal* 10, no. 2 (1990), p.68.

spiritual direction across the Christian denominations, can be a rich resource for congregational leaders in nurturing and enabling spiritual growth.

We might begin in the Church of England to re-envision the clergy as interpreters of a rich spiritual tradition, enabling congregations to make deep and fruitful connections between their faith, the life of the church and their own lived experience. Osmer, writing in the Reformed tradition, suggests that congregational leaders might be 'interpretive guides'. Reviewing the history of the position of the minister, he suggests that as clergy lost what he terms 'hierarchical status', they 'gained in access to the everyday experiences and problems of ordinary people.' He suggests that the pastoral guide today 'does not take people on the same old trip but travels with them into new territory.'³³⁷ I both concur with and question this; I agree with the stress on the collaborative nature of the spiritual journey and that 'the guide must attend carefully to the resources of the travellers and the particular journey they hope to take, as well as contributing her own expertise' but I would question the emphasis on *always* travelling into new territory.³³⁸ Surely the spiritual life also involves walking well-trodden ground? For many this will involve a more looping and circuitous path than stage systems of growth suggest.

It is good to remind ourselves at this point that the journey towards maturity is an open-ended one. In Chapter 3, I considered Roger's idea of maturity being content to be a process rather than a product and alongside this, noted McIntosh's stress on the corporate nature of the spiritual life and the practice of obedience to God:

'Whoever "I" am is only something that can be worked out in practice, a practice of

³³⁷ Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction*, pp.18-19.

³³⁸ Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction*, pp.19-20.

obedience that is never completed in terms of some putative self-fulfilment on my part, but leaves a perpetual state of watching for the *other*.³³⁹ This outwards-moving shift in orientation from self-absorption, through attention to the divine Other, to a concern for the human other, is the trajectory which was traced in most of the participants in this research project and is the grounds for my observations on ministerial outcomes, which are summarised thus:

Clergy and congregational leaders should:

- Put time and effort in nurturing their own spiritual lives, making space for retreats, personal spiritual direction and other mentoring to support them in what is essentially a lonely and consuming task.
- Take the spiritual lives of the congregations seriously and nurture them *as a priority*; by giving space and companionship, using the model of spiritual journeying with others which I find best evinced in the Ignatian tradition.
- Seek out support, companionship and further training in these strategies, encouraging the Diocesan structures of the Church of England to shift emphasis from numerical church growth to the nurture and resourcing of spiritual growth.³⁴⁰

In these ways, the local congregation might become a much more powerful and effective resource enabling lay people to live out lives in the world and the church which are attractive to others in their spiritual depth and other-oriented compassion and caring.

³³⁹ McIntosh, *Mystical Theology: The Integrity of Spirituality and Theology*, p.214.

³⁴⁰ I restrict my remarks here to my own denomination; those of other denominations are best able to judge whether these suggestions are valid in their own context.

Future research directions

Questions raised by this research

Several questions were raised during the research process which could provide fruitful avenues for further research. These were: how far do factors like age, gender, learning style and personality influence the spiritual life; how can corporate spirituality be encouraged within Anglicanism and how can we use Ignatian practice more effectively in the congregational setting? One of the clearest questions raised in this project was how far gender influences spiritual development and this is considered first.

Gender seems to be a factor in the spiritual life but its importance is open to debate and something that could usefully be further explored. Much writing on spirituality and quantitative research into the psychology of religion ignores gender entirely. The current debate is focussed around ideas of relationality. Recent work by Slee and Clark-King suggests that relationality is a particular feature of women's spirituality. I am not entirely persuaded by this. My research indicates that both sexes are relational but that they construe relationality in different ways. This may be less important in the sphere of spiritual growth than in other areas of life. I have already said that I am more persuaded by the notion of a spectrum of 'brain gender' as described by Baron-Cohen, with people appearing at some point across this spectrum. A simple division into female and male spirituality seems to me to be so broad as to be devoid of meaning and because brain gender does not map exactly onto sex difference, those who are biologically one sex but notionally the opposite brain gender might be alienated by 'broad brush' descriptions of so-called 'female'

and 'male' spirituality. Baron-Cohen's suggestion of a spectrum of empathising and systemizing is more useful, but there is also value in exploring ideas of relationality more closely.

Wendi Gardner and Shira Gabriel's work on the psychology of gender points out that 'the desire to be connected and intimate with others is considered primary and essential to the human experience' and 'the fact that the experience of these connections may be subtly shaped by gender neither alters their shared importance nor limits either sex to a social or autonomous role.' They suggest that belonging is 'an essential component' of being human and that whilst 'gender differences may be evident on the surface of the social landscape'; we should not lose sight of underlying similarities.³⁴¹ In quantitative research with US college students, they repeat the adage from psychological literature that men are thought to 'be oriented towards agency, characterized by traits such as instrumentality, assertiveness and self-confidence, whereas women are thought to be oriented towards communion characterized by warmth, expressiveness, and concern for others.'³⁴² However, the authors point out that recent research has shown some more surprising results - both men and women 'appear to look to their social ties as a basis for identity' and that interdependence is important for both sexes. But there are some distinct features: men seem to favour collective or group-based bonds whereas women favour relational (dyadic) attachments.³⁴³ This is illuminating and might prevent the overly simplistic judgment that women are relational and men are not, enabling a more subtle use of individual and group-based work, suitable for a broad range of

³⁴¹ Gardner, Wendi L. and Shira Gabriel, 'Gender Differences in Relational and Collective Interdependence,' in *The Psychology of Gender*, ed. Alice H. Eagly, Anne E. Beall, and Robert J. Sternberg (New York/London: Guilford Press, 2004), p.186.

³⁴² Gardner and Gabriel, 'Gender Differences,' p.170.

³⁴³ Gardner and Gabriel, 'Gender Differences,' p.171.

spiritualities. Recently there has been concern in the Western churches as to why church-going appeals more to women than men. Might this be connected with the possibility of forging a dyadic relationship with the priest, which Garner and Gabriel's research suggests will be a better 'fit' for women than men? If group-based attachments are more appealing to men, all the more reason for encouraging small group work in the local church.³⁴⁴

There is a good deal of confusion at the moment on the subject of gender, spirituality and church-going. Radio 4's *Beyond Belief* programme of 28 February 2011, focussed on 'men's spirituality'. One of the contributors, Douglas Mowat spoke about his experience with a men's group outside the church. He had left the institutional church because he was experiencing a 'disconnect' between the extreme experiences of his life and what was being preached in his church, where he had simply been encouraged to pray and read his Bible more. In the men's group he entered, he said people were there 'to hear' him and he found his suffering acknowledged. He felt that the fact the group contained only men was significant, but was unable to say why. Yet the very thing he pinpointed as highly significant is the same point made by Nelle Morton, quoted at the beginning of this chapter in connection with feminist theology: that we need to be 'heard to speech.' Mowat found that a shallow response to his suffering drove him away from the institutional church, which meshes with my discovery of the importance of the handling of traumatic life events in the life of faith. I think that what was being spoken of in this radio programme was not men's spirituality, but raw human need.

³⁴⁴ Within this project, both men and women were keen for groups to continue, but the clearest request for more group work came from a man, and it was one of the men who took on the leadership of the daytime prayer group that continued to meet.

Certainly, more research into spirituality in church congregations is needed. Martin Stringer's recent anthropological research questions how far gender is a factor in religion. He points out it has been difficult to learn about the religious practices and discourses of men and that in general, people do not find it easy to talk about religious behaviour, suggesting that 'It is something very private and personal that only comes to light through the long-term work of the ethnographer.'³⁴⁵ Perhaps we have simply not listened long and hard enough to other kinds of people, so that practices and beliefs remain even more deeply hidden in these communities.' He concludes that 'there is still a great deal of work to be done, and that as researchers we need to go out and find the men, the middle-class populations and the minority ethnic groups, to gain the trust of individuals and discover what they are doing in their own "religious life".'³⁴⁶ This study has contributed to that agenda, by working with a mixed gender group, across ages and across the broad spectrum of today's middle class.

To conclude on gender, it might be asked how my own gender impacted the research? In my reflections on auto-ethnography, I described the difficulties of keeping research and priestly concerns separate. Did that derive from a greater tendency towards empathic behaviour, as Baron-Cohen and Slee suggest? Was that why I struggled to keep my 'researcher hat' on and why I felt pain at what I saw as failure afterwards? The grieving I experienced at moving was certainly for the *relationships* I had left behind. Perhaps the model of maturity I have offered is itself a gendered model? I was struck by the difference between my model and what Brian

³⁴⁵ Stringer, *Contemporary Western Ethnography and the Definition of Religion*, p.96.

³⁴⁶ Stringer, *Contemporary Western Ethnography and the Definition of Religion*, p.97.

Thorne describes as ‘the person of tomorrow.’³⁴⁷ Thorne omits reference to God in this context of person-centred therapy and although there are several points of correspondence, there are differences in expression. His model speaks of risk-taking; of resistance to control and authoritarian structures and institutions. There is much more than a simple woman/man divide in spirituality and much further work to be done. Stringer suggests listening to men’s voices as well, an excellent project as long as the hard-won voice of women is not silenced in the process. Research which looks at men and women together and is prepared to admit the possibility of a complex, common humanity alongside gender-specific behaviour would be most welcome. In terms of spirituality and our relationship with God, I incline to the view that there is more that unites us than divides us.

Other factors emerging as influential on spiritual growth were learning style and personality. It was not possible to explore these avenues within the scope of this project but further research combined with a more nuanced understanding of the influence of gender would help us to build a better and more rounded picture of growth towards spiritual maturity. Analysis of my data suggests that learning styles and personality may be more influential on the spiritual journey than both age and gender, although undoubtedly the length of time spent as a practising Christian is significant. Further research into these areas would assist the church in building the spiritual maturity of existing congregations.

What of the impact of group work upon spiritual experience? This emerged as the project progressed and I have already sketched its importance in terms of ministerial

³⁴⁷ Thorne, *The Mystical Power of Person-Centred Therapy: Hope Beyond Despair*, p.35.

outcomes, that group work in spirituality should be encouraged and facilitated by clergy. Saffiotti describes Jesus' power as being relational: 'the horizontal power of interaction among equally valued children of God, rather than the vertical power of hierarchy.'³⁴⁸ To acknowledge ourselves as equally valued by God is to admit a commonality of experience, thus if we believe in the same God, then relationships with that same God will have more hallmarks of similarity than difference. Leon Turner states there is still 'little or no general agreement about what selves actually are.'³⁴⁹ He asserts that 'contemporary theologians are broadly agreed that the extreme individualistic concepts of person and self that dominated modern secular thought until relatively recently require fundamental revision.'³⁵⁰ The church should be a place where the corporate nature of human life is affirmed and valued, and we should therefore make the building up of the shared spiritual life and the value of each individual's contribution to it a priority.

Summary

At the beginning of this chapter I asserted three specific and valuable outcomes of this work: a model of spiritual maturity and a corporate praxis for encouraging spiritual growth that has been empirically tested; an encouragement to value Ignatian practice in Anglican parishes and last, the idea that surrender is an important aspect of Christian spiritual maturity which is overlooked by secular psychological models of human maturing. The research itself has generated a non-hierarchical framework of factors which nurture beneficial change, which can be flexibly employed in the

³⁴⁸ Saffiotti, 'Fostering/Hindering Christian Maturity,' p.31. It is interesting to note that neither she, nor Sofield, both writing in the Ignatian spirituality journal, *Human Development*, mention gender as a factor in spirituality.

³⁴⁹ Turner, Leon, *Theology, Psychology and the Plural Self* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2008), p.1.

³⁵⁰ Turner, Leon, *Theology, Psychology and the Plural Self*, p.3.

parish context, and a number of recommendations for the wider church to consider, primarily the shift of emphasis from numerical growth to spiritual growth. This project began with the desire to foster maturity in the individual within the context of the church congregation, but it culminates with an affirmation of the congregation itself as a spiritual community, a community where Ignatian practice can usefully be employed for the encouragement of all. The time for change is now, before another generation can echo the words of one of my participants.

DW: Okay, I've got to the end ... was there anything you wanted to add, before I switch the tape off?

Effie: No, only that ... , I wish I'd done it 30 years ago. (*Laughs gently*) Wish I had, yes, I would have had the, insight, and the knowledge, and the, ... I don't know, is it the depth of feeling? I've always tried to do my best, but, yes, **perhaps 40 years ago** I should have done this.

Appendix One – The Interview Questions

Questions	Area explored
Would you say you prayed? Can you tell me a bit about that? (c)* (n)* (Comparison - will their reported patterns of prayer change?) When we use the word 'prayer', what does it describe to you? (n)	Concepts of prayer
Do you have a picture of God? Can you describe it? Has this picture changed (c) (Compare with answer at second interview)	Operative images of God
Does believing in God help you to make sense of the world and your life? How do you think that happens? (c)	Meaning making
Do you ever have doubts? How do you cope with them (c) complexity/doubt (Compare with answer at second interview)	Coping with
How do you make important decisions in life? (n) Submission and Do you feel that it is important to be obedient to God, to do what you think God want you to do? (c)	Obedience
As someone who believes in God, how do you respond to challenging situations; like war, natural disasters, or global injustice (n)	Compassion/
How well do you think you know yourself? Are there parts of your personality you struggle to understand? (n)	Self-knowledge
Do you feel in control of your own life and what happens to you? Are you free to make decisions; does your level of freedom fulfil you or restrict you (c) (n)	Sense of freedom
In what sense do you think you depend on God? (c) (n)	Trust
What role does attending church play in your life? Do other people influence your faith? (n) (Note potential role conflict for me as parish priest here, this is why this question comes last)	Contextual influences
Pastoral question: Has anything of this thrown up anything you want to talk about further, perhaps outside the confine of this interview?	

* (c) indicates comparison question

(n) indicates narrative question, to access empirical experience and allow story telling

Appendix Two – List of free nodes

Node names		
age as factor	Ignatius	Question 2 making meaning
altruism	images of God, unbidden	Question 2 self knowledge
anxiety about prayer	images of self in relation to God	Question 2 what is prayer
avoiding God	influence of clergy	Question about church
bible	influence of family	Question about doubts
blaming God	influence of internet	Question being obedient to God
challenges to faith	influence of job or context	Question challenges to faith
change	influence of other people	Question control
change provoked by course or sermons	influence of place	Question decision making
Christ	influence of texts other than bible	Question depending on God
Christian behaviour	journal	Question image of God
church background	judgmentalism	Question influence of other people
community and the corporate	learning styles	Question making meaning
Confession	listening to God	Question self knowledge
corporate prayer	meaning	Question what is prayer
defending the faith	miracles	questioning God
difficulties in prayer	nature of faith	reactions to the course or sermons
discipline	nature of prayer	reactions to the questionnaire
effects of faith	obedience	reflections on my research
effects of prayer	openness	reliance on God
effects of the course	outcomes of spiritual experience	role of church
effects of the sermons	pattern of prayer	self justification
end of life	personality traits	self-awareness
enquiry about prayer	petitionary prayer	self-esteem
eschatology	prayer generally	significant life events
eternal life	prayer in church	silence
Eucharist and Holy Communion	Question 2 about church	sin
evangelism	Question 2 about doubts	spiritual experience
evil	Question 2 about the course	struggle
expectations of the course	Question 2 challenges to faith	submission to God
fate	Question 2 control	time as concept
feelings about faith	Question 2 decision making	validation
forgiveness	Question 2 depending on God	
free will	Question 2 image of God	
gratitude	Question 2 influence of other people	
group dynamics		
guilt		
Holy Spirit		
hope		
how prayer works		

Appendix Three - Nodes arranged in a tree hierarchy

Umbrella nodes (organising concepts) were used to categorise the base level (free) nodes:

Beliefs

- Eschatology
- Eternal life
- Evil
- Fate
- Forgiveness
- Free Will
- Hope
- Nature of God
 - Images of God, unbidden
 - Relationship with God
 - Desire for God
- Images of self in relation to God
- Miracles
- Nature of Prayer
- Nature of Faith
- Redemption
- Sin

Contextual Factors

- Age
- Church Background
- End of life
- Events
 - Eucharist/Holy Communion
 - Significant life events
 - Spiritual experience
- Role of church
- Silence
- Suffering
- Time as concept

Behaviours

- Living the faith
 - Altruism
 - Sacrifice
 - Christian behaviour
 - Community and the corporate
 - Confession
 - Defending the faith
 - Discipline
 - Evangelism
 - Freedom
 - Group dynamics
 - Meaning
 - Struggle
- Personal Characteristics
 - Gender
 - Learning style
 - Openness
 - Personality Traits
 - Self-justification
 - Self-awareness
 - Self-esteem

(continues on the next page)

Prayer

- Corporate Prayer
- Enquiry about prayer
- How prayer works
- Pattern of prayer
- Petitionary prayer
- Prayer generally
- Prayer in church

Towards God

- Avoiding God
- Listening to God
- Obedience
- Questioning God
- Reliance on God

Emotional responses

- Anxiety about prayer
- Blaming God
- Compassion
- Fear
- Feelings about faith
- Gratitude
- Guilt
- Judgmentalism

Impact/Influences

- Bible
- Challenges to faith
- Difficulties in prayer
- Expectations of the course
- Influence of clergy
- Influence of family
- Influence of the internet
- Influence of job or context
- Influence of others
 - Christ
 - Holy Spirit
 - Ignatius
- Influence of place
- Influence of texts other than the Bible
- Journal
- Preaching

Outcomes/Effects

- Change provoked by course or sermons
- Effects of faith
- Effects of prayer
- Effects of the course
- Effects of the sermons
- Outcomes of spiritual experience
- Reactions to the course or sermons
- Reactions to the questionnaire
- Submission to God
- Validation

Appendix Four - Pilot Interview Questions

General chat

When we use the word 'prayer', what does it describe to you?
Would you say you prayed? Can you tell me a bit about that?

Concepts of prayer

Do you have a picture of God? Can you describe it?
Has this picture changed since you were a child?

Operative image
of God

Does believing in God help you to make sense
of the world and your life?

Coping with
Complexity

What about when you have doubts?

Doubt

How do you make important decisions in life?
Do you feel that it is important to be obedient to God,
to do what you think God want you to do?

Submission and
obedience

What role does attending church play in your life?
Do other people influence your faith?

Sense of
Personal or corporate
salvation
Concepts of
community

As someone who believes in God, how do you respond to
challenging situations; like war, natural disasters, or global
injustice

Compassion/
social justice

How well do you think you know yourself?
How well do other people know you?

Self-knowledge

Do you feel in control of your own life and what happens to you?
Are you free to make decisions; does your level of freedom fulfil
you or restrict you?

Sense of freedom

Appendix Five – The Sermon Series

Preached in January and February 2008

Sermon 1 - Luke 11:1-13 'Lord, teach us to pray'

What is prayer, how do we learn to pray and why should we pray?

Context of the biblical passage - This passage comes just after Jesus' conversation with Mary and Martha, where he emphasises to Martha that she should not allow the busyness and distraction of her many tasks to draw her away from the life of contemplation and stillness which Mary seems to have embraced. We then switch scenes to Jesus praying alone, and Luke underlines the message he has just given by showing Jesus alone in prayer. Luke says:

He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, "Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples." [Luke 11:1] Here we see Jesus' followers learning the practice of prayer from their Lord's example, and also *asking him to teach them how to pray*.

So we might ask, 'What is prayer?' - 'How can we learn to pray?' and indeed, 'What is the point of prayer, why pray at all?' These three questions will underlie this series of four sermons on prayer.

Firstly, what is prayer - what might we include under that heading in our minds? You might like to think for a moment what comes into your mind when I say the word prayer - and those participating in the research project might want to jot a few thoughts down at this moment.

[A short pause for thinking time]

I don't know what your individual experience of prayer is, but I know from talking to a lot of people about it, that often the model people find they take from public worship is the idea of prayer as intercession - praying for others, especially those in need in some way. This impression is easily given by the Common Worship service book and Anglican worship generally, when such prominence is given to intercession over and above other forms of prayer, although of course other types of prayer feature - confession, praise and thanksgiving - but when people talk about leading the prayers, they usually mean leading the intercessions. This sermon series is not about intercession at all. It is about the personal life of prayer and how that shapes us as Christians, if indeed we manage to pray. Of course intercession may well be a feature of that life of prayer, but my aim is to show that it should only be one aspect of your life of prayer.

Most of us struggle with prayer. If we haven't yet, we will! Yet I hope you can grasp the idea that the mere desire to pray becomes prayer itself. Thinking about God, or about your relationship with God, even agonising over the fact that cannot seem to pray; these are all ways in which we pray. If your heart is turned towards God, or you are thinking about God, then you are entering in to the ultimately mysterious realm of prayer. And there is only one guide in that mysterious real, and his name is Jesus. As I said, prayer is usually a struggle; I say *usually* because in most people's lives, especially early on in the spiritual journey, there are times when prayer flows like a rolling river and we are carried along downstream quite fast. However, the rolling torrent will become a trickle and then we will struggle. The struggle is to do with learning something from God. Learning is hard, especially when we have left school, and even more so when we think there is nothing left to learn. But there is always something new in the journey of self-awareness with God, and the emphasis in these coming weeks is on exploration, on the sorts of prayer which are the product of reflection and considered thought, rather than the spontaneous. Both are important, but we tend to have more opportunity for spontaneous prayer than reflective prayer. That's the other thing people tell me, when they are under pressure or life is tough, those spontaneous talks, [or they may be rants, or complaints!] with God happen, and I should imagine most of you know what I mean by that.

So, wanting to pray, struggling to pray - these experiences are key in spiritual lives. And there is something else very important to add - there is no right way to pray, and there is not only one way to pray. We pray as we can and as God leads us if we are able to open ourselves sufficiently to God. We can learn from each

other, but we *cannot impose what works for us on each other*. Just as we are all created by God to be unique, so our relationship with God will be unique. But if, as I believe, we are all relating to the same God, then there may be aspects of our prayer lives which will correspond, and ways in which God communicates with us that we can recognise in others, and so help each other along the way. I repeatedly describe this as a journey, or a way, because I think there is a path of prayer to follow, and that we do grow in our experience with God, as we try to become mature Christians, following Christ.

An aim of this sermon series is to explore different ways of praying which you might try for yourselves at home, even if you are not participating in the course. As I describe things, listen to your heart and mind for what connects most deeply with you. We are all different, and when you have tried these different ways, I hope there will be one or two ways which enrich your own prayer life. Prayer is about learning more about who you are; and so, if you find some things difficult, then they may just not be for you, or perhaps they are pointing to things that we can learn from. Trust God in prayer, God will not unfold things to you that you cannot deal with.

So, that was a bit about what prayer is - and how do we learn to pray? I think from the person whom God sent to be with us and share our lives, we learn from Jesus, by the power of the Holy Spirit at work in the world. However it is that God gets our attention in the first place, it is perseverance and desire for God that will take us onward. That desire for God will draw us to learn from the Bible, from the world, from each other, and sometimes directly from Jesus.

Why should we pray? I can make some suggestions here from my own experience and from the gathered wisdom of the Christian church over the centuries, which you may or may not buy into, depending on who you are and where you are in your own spiritual life. We should pray because Jesus did, and he gave us a prayer to say, which doesn't include intercession as far as I can see. We should pray because it is the language of our relationship with God, it is the means by which we communicate with God. We should pray because it is the way in which we grow in faith, the way we mature into Christian actors in our world; and we should pray because it is the way to self-knowledge and self-love. I hope to unpack those reasons more in the weeks to come. For today, I hope you will just note down your reaction to them.

In the prayer course that is happening alongside this sermon series, each session there is a form of experiential prayer which is tried out. That cannot happen so easily in the confines of a sermon series, but each week, I will make a suggestion for something you can try at home, if you want. Centring prayer is the first suggestion. It is a few words to form an entrance into prayer, or to be a simple prayer in itself. It is used to steady or focus the thoughts. It is a short phrase. The first part is one of the names of God, like - Jesus, Son of God, or Holy Lord. Then we add to that a simple request, like, 'Have mercy on me', or 'lead me into your peace'. This little prayer is said with the breath, breathing in for the first phrase and out for the second. It is remarkable how calming this can be - it is a form of meditation that Christians have practised for centuries, but in recent years, seems to have got overlooked in the late twentieth century rush to find wisdom in eastern religions. Sometimes, you may want your centring prayer to take you into a time of simple conversation with God, just tell God what you want to say simply, as though you were a child. Remember that we are all like children in God's eyes. Bring what you have to God, don't sort it out. Don't be put off waiting for the ideal time - the 'if only' scenario. We are the centre of simple prayer - that is as it should be: St. Teresa of Avila wrote, "There is no stage of prayer so sublime that it isn't necessary to return often to the beginning." Be honest - no pretence - carry on the conversation with God, God listens in compassion and love, as I hope we do when our children come to talk to us.

I hope that in the next fortnight you might try this simple form of prayer when you have 5 or 10 minutes of quiet on your own, and that it will refresh you and bring you peace.

And I'd like to close with a prayer which you will recognise from a hymn:

Lord Jesus Christ
Now and every day, teach us how to pray, Son of God.
You have commanded us to do
this in remembrance, Lord, of you:
into our lives your power breaks through, living Lord.

Sermon 2 - Luke 24:13-32 - On the road to Emmaus

Jesus opens the scriptures

I'd like to open this second sermon of my series on prayer by setting out the context of the biblical passage we have just heard. Some time just after Jesus' crucifixion, two of the disciples are walking home to Emmaus, a village probably about 7 or 8 miles from Jerusalem - a bit like walking back here from York. They are going home, forlorn, dejected, feeling lost and confused. After all, their amazing teacher and leader, their wonderful, inspiring friend, Jesus of Nazareth, had just been crucified. Now what were they to do? Perhaps best just to give up, go home and take stock for a while? On the journey, they encounter a stranger who walks with them. He 'opens the scriptures to them'; he explains to them how so many parts of their holy writings - what we now call our Old Testament - refer to Jesus and how he would suffer, be put to death and yet be raised to life again by God. You have just heard what happened to them next. They were utterly transformed by their encounter with the risen Christ. They were filled with new life, energised enough to get straight back on the road back to the capital city and tell their friends that they had just seen Jesus.

I don't know if you have ever felt that your life has been changed by an encounter with Jesus? Or that it could be? Or that you want it to be? Just think about those questions for a moment

Ignatius Loyola

Next I want to tell you about someone whose life was altered for ever by what we might term an encounter with Jesus - not a road to Emmaus type experience, but a gradual change over about a year - he was called Ignatius of Loyola, in Spain. He was born in 1491 as Inigo Lopez de Loyola, and took the name Ignatius in later life, as a tribute to one of the early church fathers, St. Ignatius of Antioch. Imagine his life in the early years of the 16th century - if you have seen any of the recent TV drams about the Tudors, you'll have the right picture in your mind, for he is an exact contemporary of King Henry VIII, who was born the very same year. Ignatius was a young courtier, a 'swaggering caballero' one writer calls him, and he was a soldier in the service of the Spanish King. For some time he was in the household of the royal treasurer of Spain, so he lived a privileged life, one of comfort compared with most people of his time. Spain and France were at war and in the spring of 1521 the French invaded Spain and occupied the city of Pamplona in Navarre. The Spanish garrison in the citadel stubbornly held out and Ignatius was foremost among the defenders. On May 21st, 1521, aged 30, he was severely wounded during the bombardment when a cannonball broke one leg and badly damaged the other. He was taken back to the family castle at Loyola where he began a slow and painful recovery.

Ignatius had nothing to occupy his time, having to lie still. He wanted some books to read and instead of the courtly romances he wanted, he was given just two books - *The Life of Christ* by Ludolph of Saxony, a German Carthusian monk, and a collection of saint's lives called *The Golden Legend*, by a thirteenth century Dominican writer called Jacopo de Voragine. He had plenty of time to read these began to notice something about his thoughts and inner feelings. He was a courtier, a soldier, and for a time he was given over to day-

dreaming about his exploits. He spent hours thinking about how he might impress at court, or what feats of chivalry he might achieve once his leg was better. After a while he realised that after one of these day-dreaming sessions, he would feel disconsolate and dissatisfied, as though he were empty and superficial. When he read his two books, he would think about Christ's life, and the lives of the saints who had tried to follow Christ. Often, he would daydream about that instead; he would imagine what it might be like to follow Christ, to do some of the things the saints had done. He began to notice that when he thought about these holy things, he was left feeling very different - he felt uplifted, consoled and at peace. He began to realise that this was no coincidence but a real spiritual difference which was changing him. In those months of convalescing, gradually his military ambitions and his thoughts of advancement at court fell away, and he became resolved to serve God, and to do something which he described as 'serving souls' - he knew he wanted to do something which would help others to encounter God as he had, but he didn't know yet what that was. Ignatius was a methodical man, military precision we might say! and it seemed most sensible to him to write down the ways in which he had thought and meditated on Jesus' life and the ways in which the stories from the bible and the lives of the saints had influenced him. As he told others about his experiences, gradually these thoughts were refined into the Spiritual Exercises which many people still use today. I don't have the scope today to go into more detail about Ignatius' later life, or about the Spiritual Exercises in detail; suffice to say that the bible and the life of Christ were very important to him, and he developed a way of meditating with the stories of the bible which has come down to us today.

Ignatius' teaching about meditating on the scriptures

The words meditation and contemplation are often used in talk about prayer, so let's sort them out. Contemplation is a type of prayer in which we try to empty the mind of distractions and enter into silence and stillness, into the present moment as it is. I think it is quite a tough discipline and not something everyone can manage easily. Meditation is different in that we meditate on something - so we have a focus for our thoughts and prayer. Ignatius practised this type of prayer and commended it to others. In this group of churches, I have from time to time led guided meditations on bible passages, exactly as Ignatius suggests. The object of this type of meditation is to bring us into an encounter with Christ and to allow us to relate to him and to receive from him whatever he wants to give us. Why should we do this, you might ask? Why does Ignatius recommend it to us? Because of his own experience that such times of prayer brought him consolation, peace and an assurance of the love of Christ, and that was something he wanted others to experience for themselves.

As Jesus walked with the two disciples who hadn't recognised him yet, he helped them to understand some of the bible more deeply, and eventually to recognise him as present with them. We do not have the opportunity today to encounter our Lord in the flesh on this earth, but spiritually I believe, through the Holy Spirit, we can be with Christ, and that when we pray with the bible, we are often given the grace, the gift, of such an encounter. Again, there is not time in the scope of this sermon both to describe a bible meditation and also to guide you through one. This morning, the description must suffice. But for those who would like to experience such a guided meditation before the end of the sermon course, there will be an opportunity to do so at February's Evening Prayer service on Feb 24th at 6 p.m. at xxxxxxxxxxxxxxx church.

Here is what happens . This guide is the same as the one offered during the course, 'Exploring Prayer'. If you're trying this on your own - you need to find a place where you won't be disturbed for 15-30 minutes and get comfortable before you begin so you're not distracted by fidgeting! Choose a passage from the gospels, Matthew, Mark and Luke are the best places to start. Read your chosen passage until you feel you can replay it in your head without looking at the text. It is generally best to begin with the gospels, with someone who encounters Jesus.

If you want to try this at home, then I suggest the passage you have just heard. Imagine you are one of the disciples on the Emmaus road. Set the scene, – what can you see, hear, smell, touch and taste? How are you dressed? Who else is there? How do you feel? Imagine the setting as realistically as you can. When you are ready, and it may take some minutes to set the entire scene, then begin to imagine the action of the story. Become one of the people in the story - replay the story in your head, taking as long as it takes to move through the scene. Be aware of how you feel; whether anything makes you feel happy, or upset, or angry, or uncomfortable. Especially notice if there are things you wish to avoid, or something you especially want to happen. If in this time of prayer something happens which was not in the original bible account, don't dismiss it, but notice it. This is most likely to happen at the moment of encountering Christ. If we believe that prayer is our communicating with God, then we must expect this to be a two-way process. Jesus may take the opportunity of your openness to him to say or do something which is only for you, so his words and actions may be different from the bible passage you are replaying. Especially notice your feelings, as Ignatius did.

When you've finished imagining the story, come out of prayer and relax, maybe do something else for a short while. When you are ready, and before you have forgotten it all, write down what happened. Don't censor yourself, pass comment, or judge yourself, just write down what happened when you prayed. Then put it on one side. Later on, go back to it and re-read what you have written, asking God to tell you more about what God is revealing to you. Now is the time to write down anything else which occurs to you. Notice if you missed anything out by checking your bible. If you missed something out, or added something, ask God to explain to you why that happened. Keep your notebook where you can refer to it when you next pray this way. It will help you to understand the spiritual journey God is taking you on. Expect to meet God in these encounters.

You might like to try this way of praying in the next two weeks, particularly if you are doing the sermon series. It can be difficult however to start this way of praying on your own, so if you want to try the guided meditation, come along to the 6 p.m. service at the end of Feb. That's when I will talk you through the bible passage, as some of you may have done with me in church from time to time. Some of you will find this way of praying very helpful, others may not be able to get anything out of it at all. Fear not, Jesus said. Jesus is our companion in prayer, he teaches us to pray and we follow his lead. The bible tells us the stories of God, so if we are serious in our faith, we will want to know more about those stories and what they mean for us. We are all different, and so our prayer will not be the same. It may be that reading the bible in a different way will be more suitable for you, and if that's the case for you, do have a word with me if you want some

further helps or suggestions.

But for all of us I believe it is true, that Christ prays for us and longs that we have a relationship with him, a relationship in which we can experience the love, compassion and acceptance of God, the God who will transform our lives for the better if we take the risk of opening our hearts and minds to him...

Amen.

Sermon 3 - Psalm 139:1-18
'O Lord, you have searched me and known me'

Prayer and change - growing in self-awareness

Here we are in Lent. Our new service book, called Times and Seasons, calls us as Christians to 'the observance of a holy Lent' and it asks that we do this 'by self-examination and repentance; by prayer, fasting and self-denial; and by reading and meditating on God's holy word'. There is of course nothing new about this call, it is what Christians have tried to do throughout the centuries. And there are ways that we as a church try to support and encourage each other during Lent. For example, this year, we are encouraging those who don't read their bibles much, or think they don't know where to begin, to come along to the Good Book Club, which started last Thursday. It will help you get to grips with reading your bible. And in this sermon series, I hope you will find sustenance that will assist you with self-examination, repentance and prayer. For that is our topic this morning - self-awareness, or to put it another way, prayer and change - how prayer can transform us, when we let God into our lives.

So the passage we are looking at this morning is not the Gospel but the Psalm we have just heard. IT is an amazing piece of writing which affirms that we are open to God in every way, we are created by God, and we are held safe by God, and God knows everything there is to know about us. What I want to suggest that what is an open book to God, our self, is often a closed book to us. And it is one we have to learn to read. Much of the course the Exploring Prayer group have been following is about learning more about ourselves and who we are in God's eyes. Why should we want to grow in self-awareness? Do you think you know yourself, really know yourself ???

Why is self-awareness important?

I think it is important for several reasons, some spiritual, some emotional, and some social.

- Spiritually, it is in prayer that we learn more about who we are. It is in prayer that we can learn to see ourselves as God sees us - with eyes of compassion, forgiveness and love. It is in prayer that God can train our spirits, train us to be more fully the people we were created to be.
- Emotionally, self-awareness can bring a sense of integration, a sense of becoming a whole person, that we make sense to ourselves, that there are reasons for the way we behave as we do. This is closely linked to spiritual wellbeing, but it is not the same thing. Healing is itself to do with wholeness, and when we become more self-aware, then we move towards healing for our emotional lives.
- Socially, we are more likely to be able to get along with others if we know ourselves, our foibles and limitations, our preferred ways of behaving, which may well be the source of great irritation to others! If we know more about how we 'tick', we are more likely to be sympathetic to others who are different, and we are less likely to do damage to each other in the interplay of daily life. Self-knowledge is a bit like sandpaper - it smoothes down our rough edges!

As a Christian, speaking from my own spiritual experience, and from the experience of talking to many others, I'd like to suggest for your

consideration that the most important way we can grow in self-awareness is through the activity of prayer. And I'd like to reiterate something I said last time. It is an activity - it's something we *do*, although I hope that by talking about it, I can encourage you to *do more of it*.

I hope I have laid out some reasons why I think self-awareness is important, and the benefits it brings as we go on in the spiritual journey with God. We will never be fully self-aware, until we face God at the end of our lives. Then, as St. Paul said, we shall know, as we are fully known. But we can work towards it in this life, and it is worth working for.

So, if prayer is a route, and I would suggest, a main route to self-awareness, how does it work? Well, here of course we encounter the notion of faith. I cannot prove this to you, anymore than I can prove to you that Jesus is the Son of God, that is something you have to believe for yourself and accept in your own life. But I can offer some evidence.

When I first offered the prayer course I'd written as a curate in Tadcaster, some of it was virgin territory for all of us. The ways of praying I included in the course were things I had learned on my own journey of prayer, but after the formal course ended, the group wanted to carry on, and we began to devise things to do

together. One of those prayer activities was something I have brought into the course. We got the daily papers, and we sat down and looked at them. We cut out things which really struck us that we wanted to pray about, that we thought God should do something about, that we thought God should *change*. Before we prayed about them, we discussed our concerns and put them up on a flip chart. Then we spent about 20 minutes praying in silence about them. Coming together again, people described what had happened, what thoughts had come, what they felt. A second list went up alongside the first list of concerns.

As the list grew longer, people said things like, 'I felt as though there was something I should do' or, 'I began to see this in a whole new way', or 'I've realised something about how this must seem to the people involved'. In the end, it dawned on us all, that when we prayed for God to change things, what happened was that *WE* changed. We grew in awareness of the world's suffering, things occurred to people that they could do, we saw things in new perspectives, people gained in compassion, and forgiveness. Negative emotions like anger, resentment and strife were replaced, by love, joy, peace, self-control, - those fruits of the Spirit which St. Paul talks about. It was a moment of complete mystery, but it was also like a new dawn, a breaking in of a realisation that God is indeed a God who will transform us, and can transform us, when we open up enough to let that happen.

I can also offer you my personal experience, that it was through prayer that my own life was transformed. I know I have this often told this to you, and I shan't go into great detail today, but it was through hearing sermons at my local church and from that deciding to read my bible more, and knowing that somehow God was addressing me through its pages, I eventually was able to pray a prayer which asked God to come into my life and change it, however God wanted to. It was no sudden conversion experience, it was a gradual journey of growing more aware of God. But God took hold of that openness in prayer, and began a work of radical change, at the pace I could manage. It led eventually to ordination for me, and the sense of wholeness and integration that meant my life began to make sense, within a bigger picture of God's kingdom. It would take too long in this context to explain the detail, but suffice to say, that all the gifts I had which hadn't seemed to hang together, began to be used. The fact that I did History A level, which I hadn't really wanted to do, was

immensely useful. I loved singing, and could play the piano, these gifts began to be used again, in the church choir. The difficult life experiences, losing Keith's parents when our children were little, and then mine as we went through the training and the children growing older - these were not things we wished for, but God has used them to help others, I feel sure. There has been a real sense of resurrection. And I hope that over the years, I am beginning to realise how little it is I do know, and how much further I have to go, and also that in that, I am finding some of the humility which is the hallmark of a Christian life. As I say, still a long way to go, but through prayer, I feel that I am on the right track. And it is only prayer that keeps me on that track. Private prayer, and communal prayer both have their part to play in this, and I know I am sustained by other people praying for me when I am struggling to pray.

God continually calls us to go deeper, to let go of control and hand it over to him. That can fill us with fear at the sense of risk, but I think it is a risk we need to take, and keep on taking, if we are to be faithful to the God who calls us out of complacency into change, who calls us from stagnation to transformation, who calls us to embrace risk, surrender control and follow Christ.

Amen.

Sermon 4 - Matthew 28:16-20
'Go and make disciples of all nations'

Living our lives as Christians in the world

We have looked at the questions, What is prayer? Why pray? How do we pray? and I have made suggestions about how you might pray. Tonight at the 6 p.m. Evening service, I am offering a bible meditation for those who would like to come along and experience it, actually do the praying rather than hear me talk about it. I have described prayer as the journey of self-awareness - not the only reason for prayer, but a crucial one - one which leads us to transformation, into being more the people God wants us to be, which is moving into the question I want to address last. What is the purpose of prayer? Where does it take us? If it changes us and is to do with transformation, the question is transformation for what?

Most people are created and called by God to live in the world. A few are called to live lives apart, lives of religious commitment, as hermits, solitaires, or as monks and nuns in communities, both closed and open. I think those people are vitally important, but also that their calling is restricted to a small percentage of the population. Most of us go about our daily lives in the world. We do not live in religious communities. Neither should our lives be entirely focussed on the church community. Jesus was not enclosed by the life of his synagogue. We know he attended worship, we know he read his scripture, we know he took himself off alone to pray regularly, but he lived his life amongst the people - the great unwashed, as we might say - as they probably were in his day! He actively sought out the poor, those with disfiguring illnesses, the outcasts and those hated by society - he ate his meals with those who were considered to be the greatest sinners. He chose disciples who weren't always the sharpest tools in the box. He met with all kinds of people, rich and poor, educated and not, Jew and Gentile, and he offered them love, healing, acceptance, guidance, challenge, a rebuke when it was needed. He dealt with people as they were, and he tried to bring them to God. In the end, that cost him his life, but that was for us the ultimate sacrifice, and it was the self-sacrifice that transformed the whole world, and **is still transforming** the whole world. For many people who suffer, the gospel of a God who suffers with them is the only one that makes any sense.

So, Jesus lived in the world of his time. We live in the world of our time. And the purpose of prayer is? This morning I offer you my answer to this question which is that the purpose of prayer is that it equips us to live the Christian life. It equips us to **be** Christians and to **act** as Christians. To use a phrase from the 16th century church - prayer should lead us into being 'contemplatives in action'. The transforming power of prayer, the subject of the previous sermon on this topic, finds its end in activity as well as contemplation. There are many different spiritualities, some more active than others. For example, those who follow the teaching of St. Francis are usually those who have an activist spirituality - they like getting out and doing stuff. I would say that's the sort of spirituality that underpins people who become part of the Salvation Army for example, or those who run soup kitchens, or who agitate for social justice. There are more contemplative spiritualities, where social activity is less obvious. They are people who may support and mentor other Christians. They may be the people behind the scenes, volunteers in charity shops, visitors at hospitals, the archetypal good neighbour, the person who prays regularly for others. On this spectrum there are many shades of Christian life, but ultimately, **prayer must make a difference to your life in some way**. And its outworking **should be for the good of others**. Those who **pray** must also **do**. For the end result of prayer which is genuinely of the heart opening to God must be the unfolding of the one life for the benefit of the kingdom. And I mean by the kingdom, God's rule in our world, **not** in the church, in the world. God is out there doing stuff, getting alongside people who are in need. We need to be out there too, getting stuck in alongside him, wherever our lives of prayer lead us. And our lives of prayer will of course lead us **with** the grain of our personality, not against it. Surely that makes sense if we believe that we are created by God? Which is why it's important to know ourselves, as God teaches us who we are through prayer, and to use that knowledge to move into the freedom that Jesus promised us. It is reported in John's gospel that Jesus said:

'If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.' (John 8:32)

I think that one of the key ways we move into that freedom is by identifying the things which distract us from following Christ faithfully. I just want to suggest a few ways in which we might identify those things in our lives, and with God's help in prayer, see them for what they are.

First of all, think of a ball and chain, fastened around your ankle, like some comedy pirate scene maybe! These are the obvious things which draw us away from God. They should be fairly easy to identify, and of

course they are easier to spot in others. Drug addiction is a gross example - or alcoholism. Addictions of any kind make us dependent on something other than God; they replace God at the heart of life. The addict is focussed solely on the next fix, and if that fix is not God, then they're in trouble. Of course, **we're** not addicts are we, or are we?

How much TV do you watch? How important is the latest new gadget or toy?

How many pairs of shoes do you own? Or maybe it's not material things at all - maybe you're precious about your time being wasted, maybe you're proud of how much you can achieve, how hard you can work, how giving you can be to other people? We can become addicted to these things. They can lead us away from God. If I say, 'Well, as long as I have my whatever, I'll be ok, I'll be alright, even if God doesn't show up.' Think for a moment about what you would put in that blank space - 'as long as I have my whatever, I'll be ok, I'll be alright, even if God doesn't show up.' Maybe you're overly attached, addicted to something after all?

Think now of a cloud of midges, the sort that follow you around, flit about your head when it's a warm day - even worse, think of the shores of the loch in July, if you've ever visited Scotland in the summer. Nibble nibble, they go, on your skin. Drat those midges you say, flapping them away. You're so busy flapping, you can't think about anything else. What are the midges in your life? What do you spend so much time and energy flapping about that God can't get a look in? Do you work too hard? Do too many after-school activities, run your kids about everywhere as though their very happiness depended upon the amount of stuff they can cram in? Do you worry incessantly, or get anxious about things that haven't happened yet? Those midges are keeping you away from God.

And now let's go to the fair. Let's buy some candy floss. Ooh, yummy, full of sugar, looks pretty. But when you bite it, it melts away to nothing. It's full of empty energy - it'll give you the sugar rush, that's true, and then it will dump you down. What's the candy floss in your life - the gaudy, superficially attractive things, the shiny glittery things which make you take your eye off following Jesus? Maybe it's money? Maybe it's a new car or bigger house that you really can't afford. Maybe it's the new book or DVD. Maybe it is food. Maybe it's sex. Nothing wrong with any of these things in themselves, but once they become the centre of our attention, then they've replaced God, and before you know it, you've wandered off the spiritual path, maybe you've just fallen into a bush, or maybe you're lost in the heart of the forest. And we all know what happens to people who get lost in the heart of the forest. Any self-respecting fairy tale will tell you, bad things happen to people lost in the forest. There are wolves, and gingerbread cottages in the forest.

The trouble about being in the forest is that you need to get back on the path to find your way out. In the forest you're not going to see much apart from trees. Prayer is the path that will lead you back to God. Prayer is also the way by which you will recognise the ball and chain, the midges and the candy floss for what they truly are - distractions. Distractions are always there. The more subtle they are, the harder they are to recognise. Spend some time thinking about what distracts you from God this week. The more you can find out the truth about who you are really are, the truth about all those subtle ways that we let ourselves slide away, or be drawn away, from God, then the freer you will become. Spend some time praying for the freedom to come to God, and to inhabit God's freedom - the open plain, where everything is clear, where we can lift our eyes and focus on heaven. For it is in the open plain that Jesus stands, in plain sight, **attracting us, not distracting us.**

And last of all, let me end this sermon where I began it, by reminding you that the purpose of prayer is to draw us into lives lived as Christians - lives of loving, compassionate, just and forgiving, **action**. Lives which reflect and emulate Christ's. Where can your lives be more loving, more compassionate, more just and more forgiving? Jesus calls us to go, and make disciples, to go and help others to follow. And earlier in Matthew's gospel, he tells of the paradox at the heart of the Christian life: Chapter 11, verse 28 and 29: *'Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.'*

May your prayer lead you to understand this more fully in your own life.

Amen.

Appendix Six

The handouts given to participants in the course: Exploring Prayer

A handout was given at each session, in double sided A5 format, so that they could be kept with whichever journal or notebook the participant was using.

They are shown on the following pages in landscape format.

Exploring Prayer – One

We will discover that by praying we learn to pray
(Richard Foster - Prayer)

He was praying in a certain place, and after he had finished, one of his disciples said to him, “Lord, teach us to pray, as John taught his disciples.” Luke 11:1

As we have chosen to be here, we have some experience of prayer, or desire to pray in some way. We may have years of experience to draw on. Much of this prayer may have been intercessory prayer, pastoral prayer during worship and congregational prayer in unison. Most of us struggle with prayer. If we haven’t yet, we will! The struggle is to do with learning from God. The emphasis in these coming weeks is on exploration, on the sorts of prayer which are the product of reflection and considered thought, rather than spontaneous. Both are important, but we tend to have more opportunity for spontaneous prayer than reflective prayer.

There is no right way to pray, we pray as we can and as God leads us if we are able to open sufficiently to God. One aim is that we will explore different ways of praying together. As we try things out, listen to your heart and mind for what connects most deeply with you. We are all different, and when you have tried these different ways, I hope there will be one or two ways which enrich your own prayer life. Prayer is about learning more about who you are; and so, if you find some things difficult, then they may just not be for you, or perhaps they are pointing to things that we can learn from. Trust God in prayer, God will not unfold things to you that you cannot deal with.

Centring prayer

An entrance into prayer – to steady or focus the thoughts - short, with the breath, include a name of God (all persons of Trinity), and a request – for example, 'have mercy', or, 'draw near' –
We pray our centring prayer.

Simple prayer

Bringing all we are to God, don’t sort it out. The prayer of beginning again. Come as a little child. Don’t be put off waiting for the ideal time – the ‘if only’ scenario. We are the centre of simple prayer – that is as it should be: “There is no stage of prayer so sublime that it isn’t necessary to return often to the beginning.” (St. Teresa of Avila). Be honest – no pretence – carry on the conversation with God, God listens in compassion and love, as we do when our children come to talk to us.

We pray using our centring prayer if we want to, first, then simply talking to God in the privacy of our own heads, for a few minutes.

Closing prayer:

Lord Jesus Christ

Now and every day, teach us how to pray, Son of God.

You have commanded us to do

this in remembrance, Lord, of you:

into our lives your power breaks through, living Lord.

For the next two weeks:

try to pray for five minutes each day, using centring prayer or simple prayer; knowing that God is honoured and you are refreshed. Try different things as needed – posture place, time, etc. Let your prayer life unfold in ways that are natural for you.

For the next session:

Please bring a largish notebook and something to write with. This notebook will be your private memory book, so choose something you can keep.

Exploring Prayer – Two

I have sometimes seen more in a line of the bible than I could well tell how to stand under; and yet at another time the whole bible hath been to me as dry as a stick. John Bunyan

They said to each other, “Did not our hearts burn within us while he was talking to us on the road, while he was opening the scriptures to us?” (Luke 24:32)

Using the bible in our prayers

There are so many ways in which the scriptures feed and nourish our prayers, that we could probably spend all our time with them. This week, we taste two different ways. You may read your bible quite a lot, maybe you use bible notes. Or perhaps the bible is literally “a closed book” to you. Whatever your knowledge of the bible is, learning to use it carefully will deepen your prayer life and bring you closer to God.

Lectio divina

Don’t be put off by Latin – it means holy reading!

Reading a passage slowly and attentively, stopping where something strikes us, and maybe sucking it like a boiled sweet, turning it over and reflecting on it, allowing God to draw out its meaning for us. Often we begin with quite lengthy readings, but as we do this more often, we may find only a verse or two, a phrase, or a single word, can stop us in our tracks. If nothing offers, try this process of reflection: Read a short passage several times. Ask God to speak to you within it. Reflect on what this passage might mean for your life today, spend a few minutes on this. Pray about what is revealed – if it’s just mind-numbing boredom, pray about that! Then relax into stillness if you can for a short while, knowing that God loves you to be there.

Readings: Psalm 139; Exodus 3:1-6; Luke 1:26-38

Guided meditation John 21:1-14

Other passages to try: Luke 19:1-10, John 4:7-30; Mark 4:35-41

Doing a bible meditation on your own - some reminders

Find a place where you won’t be disturbed for 15-30 minutes and get comfortable before you begin so you’re not distracted by fidgeting!

Read your chosen passage until you feel you can replay it in your head without looking at the text.

It is generally best to begin with the gospels, with someone who encounters Jesus. Imagine you are that person.

Set the scene, – what can you see, hear, smell, touch and taste? How are you dressed? Who else is there? How do you feel? Imagine the setting as realistically as you can. When you are ready, and it may take some minutes to set the entire scene, then begin to imagine the action of the story. Be aware of how you feel; if anything makes you feel happy, or upset, or angry, or uncomfortable. Take note if there are things you wish to avoid, or something you especially want to happen.

When you’ve finished imagining the story, come out of prayer and relax, maybe do something else for a short while. When you are ready, and before you have forgotten it all, write down what happened. Don’t censor yourself, pass comment, or judge yourself, just write down what happened when you prayed. Then put it on one side. Later on, go back to it and re-read what you have written, asking God to tell you more about what God is revealing to you. Now is the time to write down anything else which occurs to you, any comments you have. Notice if you missed anything out by checking your bible. If you missed something out, or added something, ask God to explain to you why that happened. Keep your notebook where you can refer to it when you next pray this way. It will help you to understand the spiritual journey God is taking you on. Expect to meet God in these encounters.

If you found this way of praying quite difficult, but yet you are drawn to it, then be reassured, it gets easier with practice! If it didn’t help you at all, that’s fine, something else is for you.

Exploring prayer - Three

God is not your puppet, neither are you his: that is what makes Christian prayer a strenuous and disturbing business.

(Linette Martin

Practical Praying)

"Knock, and the door will be opened for you." Luke 11:9

Thinking more about God - describing our feelings, thoughts and pictures.

Take some time on your own. Begin with a simple prayer like, 'Lord, let me come to you' or a centring prayer you have used before. When you feel settled, ask yourself what comes into your mind when you think of God, Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Write down any words, descriptions, feelings or pictures which come as you pray to the persons of the Trinity in turn.

Close your prayer with some words of thanks: 'Thank you for this moment of peace' or whatever seems right for you.

There will then be some time for sharing thoughts and ideas.

How does God respond to our prayer?

Time for discussion

Some people say they believe God has answered their prayer. Can you think of a time when that was true for you?

Why does God not always answer our prayer, even when he has promised to? (Luke 11:9-13)

Sometimes it can seem as though God doesn't answer our prayer. Has that ever happened to you?

How did it make you feel?

What did you think was happening?

What did you think should have happened?

Do you ever think about eternal life? Does this alter the way you feel/think about unanswered prayer?

Unanswered prayer is not the same as continuing to pray when God seems to have gone away. We will come back to this later in the course

A closing prayer by Ian Petit:

"Lord, from where I stand I see many needs and wants. You have promised that if we ask you would answer.

I do find it very difficult to see how you answer some of my prayers. I know you are not bound to answer my prayers in the way I would like you to do, but at times it really does look as though you did not hear me.

For give me for talking to you this way, but I want you to be a God I can say anything to. Thank you for not being touchy. I offer you my mind and ask you to enlighten me. I am sure that is what you want. Amen.

For you to do on your own

This week, spend some more time thinking about times when you thought that God answered prayer, and times when it seemed that your prayers were not answered.

Pray about the feelings and thoughts you uncover.

Write down what happens when you pray.

Re read Luke 11:9-13 - is there anything you need to ask God to do?

Exploring prayer – Four

Icons are a means of entering into the stillness of the heart where God can be known and loved.

Thomas Kala

We declare to you what was from the beginning, what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have looked at and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life.
(1 John 1:1)-

Icons

Discovering icons is like travelling into an unfamiliar country – may take time for an icon to yield its treasure.

Why represent God?

Jesus is the *eikon* (Gk) of God; that is, the image and exact representation of God. Councils of the church (Trullo 692 and Nicaea 787) said that the Incarnation was key. “If Jesus had himself made God visible, then visual theology was as appropriate as the verbal theology of the bible. If the Word had been seen, touched and proclaimed, Christ could be portrayed visibly as well as preached” (Deborah Seddon, Grove booklet *Gospel Icons*). They are not themselves objects of worship. They can be lenses.

History of icon painting

Come from the earliest period of the Xn faith. Usually the works of nuns and monks, often working in teams. Orthodox origins (the church in the East). Setting – Byzantine empire. Centre of eastern Christendom was Constantinople, built 330 on the ancient site of the Greek town Byzantium.

The icon is prayed over as it is made. A symbolic language is used and the range of subjects is restricted – because naturalism cannot convey eternal truth. Completely unlike religious art, because the intention is to bring you to identify with a tradition, they are not about personal experience.

Contemplating icons

Invite us into stillness, wash clean our overused sense of sight. We stand before the image and contemplate what it symbolises.

Geometric lines – often we are the vanishing point, “Our eyes are meant to be restrained from diving into the picture because it is God who comes out to welcome us.” The beholder completes the icon.

Meditation on the Rublev icon (early 15th century)

Genesis 18:1-5

Art

All art can transcend human experience – see what speaks to you – maybe paintings, or sculpture, or music.

Images - if you borrow a picture please bring it back to the next session.

Maybe you have a favourite picture, or you light a candle as a symbol? Think about how these things help you to pray. They are good so long as they help you to come closer to God and do not become objects of worship in themselves.

Exploring prayer - Five

St Teresa writes, "Along this path of prayer, self-knowledge and the thought of one's sins is the bread with which all palates must be fed no matter how delicate they may be: they cannot be sustained without this bread." How startling to think that our own sinfulness can be the bread by which we are fed. How can this be? Foster, Prayer, p.31

O Lord, you have searched me and you know me. Psalm 139:1

What is examen?

Consciousness and conscience

Prayerful reflection on the events of the day to see how and where God has been at work among us and how we have responded.

Then inviting God to search our hearts; we cannot do it alone otherwise we either invent a thousand self-justifications, or we err on the side of self-flagellation.

Our aim is the precious gift of self-knowledge, and through faith this will lead us to self-acceptance and self-love which draw their life from God's acceptance and love. We practise this by turning inward, not outward, or upward, but in towards the God who is closer to you than you are to yourself.

Your own reflection - a review of the day

There might be a best time for you, or it may be a phase, like Richard Foster playing basketball every night during the summer. Try this:

Relax, be still, know you are in God's presence

Remember with thanksgiving the gifts of God today; rest for a while in that faith-filled gratitude

Ask God to help you to see and understand how God's love has been working within you, as you review the events of yesterday

Peacefully reflect on what happened to you and in you yesterday.

Whatever God may want to show you, let him!

For inadequate or selfish responses to God's love, express sorrow and confidently ask for forgiveness

Look forward to today, pray for the sensitivity to recognise the Lord in whatever ways he may greet you and call you.

(If you prefer to do this in the evening, reflect on the day that has passed, and look forward with anticipation to the coming day.)

"Into your hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit" (Psalm 31:5)

Summary: Gratitude; Awareness: Confession: Hope

Feedback

Journalling

One time-tested way to enter into the examen is by means of keeping a spiritual journal, a highly intentional reflection on the events of our days. It focusses on why, rather than who or what. Its value may be in marking our progress, recording our struggles and being able to review them in less troubled times, to grow in self-knowledge.

However, it is not vital. As far as we can tell, Jesus didn't keep a journal! BUT - it can be valuable for certain people, usually those who are especially verbal.

Remember, we cannot dictate the means of God's grace or how God might choose to address us.

Closing prayer

Enter my heart, O Holy Spirit, come in blessed mercy and set me free.

Throw open, O Lord, the locked doors of my mind; cleanse the chambers of my thought for thy dwelling:

Light these the fires of thine own holy brightness in new understandings of truth

O Holy Spirit, very God, whose presence is liberty, grant me the perfect freedom to be thy servant today, tomorrow, evermore. Amen.

Exploring prayer - Six

The realm of God is dangerous. You must enter into it and not just seek information about it. (Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh)

As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, "Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?"
(Mark 10:25)

Reflecting on last week's prayer time - examen.

Praying in the world and with the world

We can't escape our context. We are part of it; we are shaped and influenced by where we live, the people we know and meet, and the events of the world around us.

Today we are going to look at some events around us through the lens of the daily newspapers.

Firstly we will look at the papers and choose from them some stories that we feel we might want to pray about, or people and situations that might need lifting to God.

Secondly, after discussing these stories and deciding what the needs are, we will then take some time apart to pray about one or more of the news stories.

Third, we will come back together to share any insights we have gained during our time of prayer.

If it helps to note things in your journal as you pray, do so.

What do you now make of the two quotations at the top of the page?

Exploring prayer - Seven

The supreme expression of personality is God himself. Human beings are created in the image and likeness of God. Higher than the angels, we share the nature of the divine.

(Bruce Duncan, *Pray Your Way*)

It was he[Christ] who gave some to be apostle, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ. (Ephesians 4:11-13)

Praying from who we are - prayer and personality

There is no one way to pray. However, individual churches tend to focus on a single style. If it fits you, that's great, but if not, prayer can become difficult, boring, and remote. You may become so discouraged that you stop praying much at all.

We pray together: ***Lord God, thank you that you have made each of us in a unique way. We thank you for this awesome diversity of your creative power. Help us to discern a way of prayer that best fits who you have made us to be. Give us new ways to know you, to respond to you, to hear you and to love you. In Jesus' name, Amen.***

Who are we - our preferences?

Head or heart? Thinking or feeling? Structured or spontaneous? Active or passive? Music or quiet? Movement or stillness. Focussed or free-ranging?
Listen to the descriptions and write down which you identify most with - A, B, C or D.

Explanation of Prayer exercises

Discussion afterwards:

Did you feel comfortable with the style of prayer you chose?

Did you learn anything new?

Was anything about the exercise unhelpful?

Praying where we are

Our jobs, our home lives, our busy-ness, or lack of it - how do these things affect our prayer?

Ideas - prayer walks, looking at the world.

Our work as prayer - especially the boring repetitive tasks like washing-up, cleaning, travelling.

Routine or spontaneity?

Where can we fit prayer into busy lives?

What about prayer places? Poustinia, shrine, icons etc.

For the rest of the week:

Try the other prayer styles if you would like to. Reflect whether they felt easy or difficult. Record what happens in your journal if it helps.

Pray that God will guide you as you reflect on what you are learning.

A prayer of St. Francis

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.

Where there is hatred let me sow love,

Where there is injury, pardon

Where there is doubt, faith;

Where there is despair, hope;

Where there is darkness, light;

Where there is sadness, joy.

O divine Master,

grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled

as to console, to be understood as to understand,

to be loved as to love,

for it is in giving that we receive,

it is in pardoning that we are pardoned,

it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

Ignatian prayer A**Focussing the senses**

St. Ignatius of Loyola taught his followers to project themselves back into past events, to relive the biblical events in all their details, and to participate in the events. In so doing, a person brings the presence of Jesus into the here and now. Ignatius urged the use of all five senses.

Read softly to yourself the Good Samaritan, Luke 10:30-35

Project yourself into the story. Be alert to what you see, hear, touch, smell, or even taste. If it helps, make notes in your journal as you pray.

Imagine yourself as the priest who passes by. What reasons do you have for not getting involved?

Then imagine yourself as the person who fell among the robbers and was left half dead. What did you think and feel as people passed you by? How did it feel when the Samaritan came to your aid?

Then, imagine yourself as the Good Samaritan. What were your experiences as you went to help? How are you being called to be a good Samaritan today?

Augustinian prayer B**Intuitive and free ranging**

Developed for the convents and monasteries in North Africa served by St. Augustine. Asks people to use creative imagination to understand the words of Scripture for their own lives. It uses intuition, dreams and visions. Ideas come and go, symbols may be important, the sudden 'highlighting' of words in a book, hymn, or passage of scripture. Connections between seemingly unconnected things may illuminate prayer, or there may be a stillness and waiting on God.

Two suggestions to try:

Read slowly Isaiah 49:14-16, substituting your own name for Jerusalem. Repeat it meditatively, allowing God to come to you through the words. Follow any reflections or feelings engendered in you by the picture of God as your mother and you as the deeply loved child.

Or

In your journal, begin a written conversation with God, writing both your thoughts and what seem to be God's responses.

Try starting with:

Hello, Lord, it's me

I've been waiting to hear from you.....

Keep going until the flow stops, neither forcing nor quenching.

Franciscan prayer C Praying from the heart

St. Francis of Assisi was a spontaneous, nature-loving man who found God in the freedom of poverty and movement. This prayer is flexible and free-flowing. It may feel right outdoors, may spill over into action; it responds spontaneously to the movement of the Spirit.

Prayer suggestion:

Think of the person you love most in this world. Ask yourself, "How can I see the presence of God in that person?" Spend some time praising and thanking God for giving so much goodness, beauty, grace..... to that person. Spend some time thanking God for the gift of love whereby you are able to love that person and that person is able to love you.

Take a sheet of paper and draw a doodle or a symbol which expresses what you feel, what you see of God in that person. Or write a song or poem about them. Keep your drawing or notes in your journal if you have one.

Prayer suggestion:

Read Cardinal Newman's "Lead, kindly light" (378 in Hymns Old and New Orange book), reflecting on the meaning of the phrases for you. What do they mean when you apply them to your own life? If you know the tune, sing the hymn to yourself, and use it as you go about your daily tasks as an aid to prayer. (If you don't know the tune, maybe you could learn it!)

If this hymn does not appeal, look through the hymn book until you find some words which have meaning for you today.

Thomistic prayer D Praying with the mind

This type of prayer is orderly; it is based on rational thought that seeks to know the truth. You might choose an issue or concern and examine it intensively, maybe coming to a new resolution. You might want to look closely at a biblical passage, asking "Who is involved; what is happening; why, how." It is named here after Thomas Aquinas, the great Christian thinker of the C13th. (1225-74)

Prayer suggestion:

Have your journal handy, or a sheet of paper to make some notes on.

Read Matthew 5:23-24 - "So when you are offering your gift at the altar, if you remember that your brother or sister has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go; first be reconciled to your brother or sister, and then come and offer your gift."

Then think about these questions - Are you willing to take this command of Jesus literally? Do you believe that it is more important to be reconciled with your brothers and sisters than it is to take communion on Sunday? At present is there anyone in your life not reconciled with you? Have you tried to heal the breach? What do you think God would want you to do? Are you able to love this person who is not reconciled to you? Even if the 'thing against you' is not real (imaginary) or unjust, is there anything else you should do to bring understanding between the two of you?

As you think all these things through, know that you are in the presence of God. Offer all your meditations to God, and resolve to listen for what God has to say.

Prayer suggestion: The Cross. What does Jesus mean when he insists that to be disciples we must take up our cross (Mark 8:34-38)? What crosses are you carrying? Am you carrying them like Jesus did? Do you need to change anything in my attitude to these crosses? Write down your reflections to read again later.

Exploring prayer - Session Eight

Do not forget that the value and interest of life is not so much to do conspicuous things....as to do ordinary things with the perception of their enormous value.

(Teilhard de Chardin)

Be still and know that I am God

Psalm 46:10

Making decisions

Much of our exploring of prayer has been to do with accepting that we are loved as we are by God, and that we all respond in different ways to that love. What helps one person to pray will not necessarily be helpful to another. Not all the ways of prayer that we have dipped into will have proved helpful to you. That's natural. But we change through time - maybe something you have tasted and not enjoyed will return in the days, weeks, years to come, as a fruitful source for your prayer life, drawing you closer to God. Time given up to God is never wasted; God always returns our commitment, with generosity!

Sometimes people tell me that they never really make decisions. Perhaps they mean momentous ones. But surely, life is a process of decision making isn't it? At least, once we are adults. But even as children we make decisions all the time. Let me give you just two examples: I'm a toddler in church; Mummy asks me to be quiet, do I do as she asks, or do I open my mouth and shout just that little bit louder? Now I'm a bit older, I'm playing with a ball inside the house, something I've been told not to do. The ball knocks a picture frame off the shelf and the glass breaks. What do I do? Run and tell someone; pretend I don't know anything about it when it's discovered; or blame it on my little brother? This process of decision-making becomes more complex throughout life, as we face moral, ethical and spiritual questions, both personal and global.

Today, we want to focus on the spiritual nature of decision making, rather than the moral and ethical. Here are a few places to start:

How did you decide to come on this course? And then ask, why?

What made you come to church the last time you came? And if you are a regular churchgoer, why do you keep going to church?

After a short time for reflection, we'll share our ideas, and then we'll think about decisions we have made over our lives.

Drawing a time line of our lives

In the quiet, draw a line on your paper which you can put dates along. Begin with your birth, near the end of the line is where you are now. You cannot see into the future, but you can leave a space for hopes and dreams.

Mark along your line some important milestones - the arrival of brothers or sisters, going to school, changing schools, moving house, getting a job, illnesses you can remember, or the illness of others around you which affected you, getting married, or divorced, or being widowed, important losses, important milestones like the birth of children or some achievement.

When you have taken time to do this carefully, make a second line in a different colour if you have it, or below it if you don't, which corresponds in time, but which shows your relationship with God. When crucial things happened for you, where was God? When were you nearer and when were you further away? When and how did your life of faith begin? How and when did you learn about God? Who helped you or was important for you? Did you ever tell them? Were there times when you doubted God existed? How have you coped with those? How do you feel about God now?

When you have finished putting on all the information you can, ask God to take you deeper into understanding your journey. Reflect on how your life with God has been. Ask God for wisdom for the journey that is to come, wherever it may take you. Are there any special things you need to ask God for, is there a particular grace you need for today, or tomorrow, or this week, or this season of your life?

Write down anything you learn during this time of prayer. Date your timeline and keep it in your journal. In the next two weeks, see if things come to you that you can add to it. Be grateful for God's companionship.

Exploring prayer - Session Nine

Ignatius came to view the world in the dramatic terms of a sacred history in which man [sic] was called to action by a God who is ever active in creation, 'who works and labours for me in all creatures upon the face of the earth'. Each [person] was called to discern the universal struggle and choose his side, to enter the spiritual combat, and to labour with Christ. From the introduction to *The Autobiography of Ignatius Loyola*, edited by John C. Olin, translated by J. F. O'Callaghan

Jesus said, 'Take care! Be in your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possession', and then he said, 'God said to [the rich man], "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but who are not rich towards God.' Luke 12:15 and 20-21

Discernment - finding the right path and recognizing the distractions for what they are

If we want to pray or spend time with God, then we should be encouraged by the fact that Ignatius says we have already made the choice for God, but we all recognize that familiar feeling of straying away, into no-man's land. We want to look at the ways we are subtly drawn away from God - once we can spot them for ourselves, we are less likely to be entrapped by them.

Riches, honours and pride

Ignatius uses these terms, from his 16th century position, to describe those earthly things in life which can obsess us and become our goals, and so lead us away from seeking and serving God. They are still hugely relevant today.

Riches.

What is it that attracts you? Are you drawn to material riches, a better car, house? Maybe you are ambitious for the better job. Is it clothes, or things about the house? Maybe it's more subtle than that - maybe you have to have the latest things for your children, or maybe it's the latest book, or theory that you have to be up to date with? Maybe it's status, or image?

What is it that you need that makes you feel safe and self-sufficient? There's the key - for whatever makes you feel self-sufficient will lead you away from relying on God. Fill in the blank - 'As long as I have my own, I will be alright' What about your barns - Look at the passage in Luke, what do you need to fill your barns with to feel ok? And look for those pinpricks of pain - what really 'needles' us - losing money, time?

Honours

What are they for us? Most of us don't want to be Lord Mayor, or MBE, so we have to think of the honours in the world *in which we have chosen to live*. With our family, in our church, with our friends, what are the honours which are a real temptation to us? Are we aware of them? What's my position in the family? How do I need to be needed? What do I need to be known for? Where do we feel we should be in our social gatherings. And what are the pinpricks - does it hurt to be ignored when we enter a room for example, or do we worry that we are being talked about?

Pride

Most people can recognize this. What are the things which we take pride in - the things which puff us up and make us feel self-important?

This is what gives us the strength and power to walk away from God. Pride is the root of our saying, 'I don't need you, God.' It is closely connected to fear - fear that God may overwhelm us, or make us dependent.

In the prayer time - pray over the questions that have been posed for you. Where and what are your riches, honours and pride? How do they draw you away from God?

Close by remembering that if we have chosen to pray, then God will hold us safe and give us the ability to face our own demons and to be honest about them. That is the beginning of breaking their power over us.

Exploring prayer - Session Ten

O God, who art the author of peace and lover of concord, in knowledge of whom standeth our eternal life, whose service is perfect freedom: defend us thy humble servants in all assaults of our enemies; that we, surely trusting in thy defence, may not fear the power of any adversaries; though the might of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

(The Second Collect, for Peace, from the Book of Common Prayer)

To the Jews, who had believed him, Jesus said, 'If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.'
(John 8:32)

Moving into freedom

Last time we thought about the things which bind and shackle us, and distract us from God. This week we want to think about the freedom of following Christ. We are called by Christ to love God and love our neighbour as ourselves. Jesus also calls us to go and make disciples. So whatever else our faith is about, it is not about prayer alone. It is about prayer which leads us into action, prayer which sustains in our lives as Christians. Prayer is like the sap in a plant, it is like the root system - both images which remind us that if we want our lives as Christians to be vital, then we need to stay rooted in God. This can only happen in prayer and worship.

Now we are going to review what we have done over the last nine weeks, using some of the ways of prayer we have learned.

Our aim in this final session is to think about how we can move into freedom in our lives of prayer - using the techniques lightly and sensitively, adding to them where we can, and remembering most of all that when we pray, we change. We change to become more the people God wants us to be. We need to remember too that God calls us not just to be, but also to do - what was called in Ignatius' time, being 'a contemplative in action'. You may think you can do very little for others. At the very least, you can give what is perhaps the greatest gift, you can pray for others, even if you can do little else.

Reviewing the course - using the examen in a new way.

A check list for you:

Session One
Simple and Centring prayer

Session Two
Meditating with the bible

Session Three
Images of God; How does God respond to our prayer?

Session Four
Icons

Session Five
Examen - structured reflection on the day

Session Six
Praying with the newspapers

Session Seven
Prayer and personality - this is the way God made us!

Session Eight
Making decisions, making good choices - time line

Session Nine
Discernment - finding the right path; recognizing the distractions

Session Ten
Reflection - where are you now. How far have you come?

Thank God for the journey, and ask him to help you to journey on.

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